

Fog on the Barrow Downs: Celtic Roots of Tolkien's Mythology

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FOG ON THE BARROW DOWNS:
Celtic Roots of Tolkien's Mythology



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English Department Honors Thesis

Submitted: April 12, 2010



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to take a moment to formally recognize the resource I've tapped most frequently throughout this entire process: Professor Philip O'Leary. He has proven to be immensely helpful at every stage – from research to writing to editing to staying sane. In fact, without Professor O'Leary, this project would not have gotten off the ground, and I'd likely be writing about something very different and very not Celtic. Prior to his endearingly comic rendition of “The Death of Derbforgaill” as an introduction to his Celtic Heroic Age course I took in 2008, I didn't even know if the word Celtic was pronounced “sel-tik” or “kel-tik.” Little did I know that story would open up one of the most intriguing literary worlds I've encountered, and little did I know that his class would eventually lead to the merging of the Celtic world with another literary world I adored: Middle Earth. From that class, my love of Tolkien's mythology has dovetailed into an equally avid appreciation for Celtic mythology and literature, and I have no one but Professor O'Leary to thank.

I would also like to thank Carly Monsen, for spending countless nights falling asleep to the sounds of draft after draft being read aloud, and for creating the border on my title-page.

Cover Art: Picture 41 in *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*.

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CHAPTER ONE:

AT THE SIGN OF THE PRANCING PONY

An Introduction

Tolkien's only use for my thesis would be fuel for a fire on a cold winter night. *Celtic Roots of Tolkien's Mythology*? On second thought, it wouldn't last even that long. More likely, he'd start the fire as soon as he read the title, as the destruction of this thesis would require fire even if the weather didn't. Anything would be better than such an atrocious assertion for him. As fire, for Tolkien, is the ultimate doom (destroying the ring requires the *fires* of Mt. Doom), so would he condemn this piece to the fires as quickly as he could. And yet...

As Flannery O'Connor says when describing the way she wrote "Good Country People," "I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women that I knew something about, and before I realized it I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg."¹ This statement highlights the tenuous grasp an author has on his or her own work – she had no intention of introducing a daughter with a

¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," *The Story and its Writer* (New York: Bedford Books, 2007), 970.

wooden leg in her story, but the daughter insisted on coming along for the ride. This uncertainty on the author's part often confounds the enterprising reader who attempts to divine an author's intentions, thoughts and process with a particular piece of work. Often, the enterprising reader will turn to the author himself to look for guidance. Intuitively, one would suspect such guidance would be straight and true. And sometimes it is. But often, as O'Connor's statement shows, authors know little more than readers divine on their own. Fortunately, a more reliable guide exists: the text itself. An author's unreliability, much like a narrator's, can be mitigated through frequent interaction with the text itself. Still, when one has finally determined a particular set of conclusions are logical, based in text, and likely true, there is still a palpable unease in giving voice to these conclusions. In fact, making these conclusions becomes a never-ending process of checking, rechecking and re-rechecking details and facts, passages and timelines, a process of constantly reassuring oneself of the thoughts. At the end of the day, the best one can hope for after grappling with a work is a statement of the form "with the knowledge I possess, it seems plausible that..."

These dangers aren't illusory either. They are very real, and trip up many attempts at interpretation. Take, for example, the popular notion that J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is an allegory for World War II. It

seems valid enough, at first. You have a purely malevolent character that has developed machines of war bent on subjugating the world. You have a cataclysmic device (the Ring) that could be used to destroy, yet taints the wielder. You have a world divided along clear battle-lines... the points of contact seem nigh endless. Yet, this interpretation neglects two very important facts that make it extremely unlikely, facts that can be found in Tolkien's foreword to the updated editions of *Lord of the Rings*, wherein he says "it was written long before the foreshadow of 1939 had yet become a threat of inevitable disaster."² Clearly it can't be an allegory for World War II as the story itself was written before the war. Even if he were capable of time-travel, Tolkien's feelings on allegory as a literary device are rather clear: "It is neither allegorical nor topical...I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence."³ In asserting that *Lord of the Rings* is an allegory for World War II one also asserts that Tolkien was prescient (or discovered the secrets of time-travel) *and* was willing to imprison his most treasured story, his life's work, in the dungeon of despised allegory.

Despite many hidden traps involved in the exploration of any work, I will attempt to investigate the origins of Tolkien's mythology. I

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books 1982), 10.

³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 10.

will not be the first person to attempt an examination of his work in this manner, nor will I be the last. I do feel, however, that despite the plethora of difficulties swirling around any in-depth look at the unkempt tangle of stories Tolkien left behind, I have drawn some conclusions worth mentioning. Most of the studies done on Tolkien's sources focus on Scandinavian origins for the tales of Middle Earth (the setting for his mythology), yet I propose there are other, less discussed origins in Celtic mythology as well. Initially, I was unsure why scholars often discount or ignore Celtic mythology as a valid source, until I came across the words of the man himself on the subject:

Needless to say they are not Celtic! Neither are the tales. I do know Celtic things (many in their original languages Irish and Welsh), and feel for them a certain distaste: largely for their fundamental unreason. They have bright colour, but are like a broken stained glass window reassembled without design. They are in fact 'mad' as your reader says--but I don't believe I am.⁴

Straight from Tolkien's own mouth I found pretty damning evidence staring me in the face. Now, at least, I understood why Celtic Mythology was rarely talked about in conjunction with Middle Earth; the last person

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, ed. and Christopher Tolkien, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 26.

to mention it got an earful. Tolkien seems to *hate* the Celts. Yet, unlike with his rejection of allegory, I don't trust Tolkien on this one. There's simply too much contradicting his statement to take it at face value.

For example, Tolkien models his fictional book-group The Notion Club on the Inklings, a group of authors he was a part of. He even goes so far to assign characters, assigning himself the character Ramer, of whom he writes "among his interests are Celtic languages and antiques."⁵ And that is where this exploration leads. I take you down the rabbit hole, rejecting Tolkien's assertion that he is not mad as a Celt. This, then, is what makes such a study interesting. The fundamental core around which these statements swirl is the unreliable words of an author about his own work. Did Tolkien know his own mind when he said those words, and if so, do the words actually match his mind? This potential incongruence, while interesting, is also an obstacle to any attempt to identify Celtic roots in Tolkien's work. An author who so vehemently denied Celtic influences in his work for most of his life is problematic for any enterprising scholar attempting to link him to the Celtic tradition. It introduces an extra level of uncertainty and ambiguity in an already ambiguous process. To further complicate matters, there are myriad other issues in both the Celtic and

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 159.

Tolkien's mythology clouding the process, issues that are entirely independent of Tolkien's self-expressed distaste.

The problems with the Celtic literature are much the same as the problems with any collection of ancient stories: time. The Celtic literature, however, is more ravaged by time than most. For example, in Welsh Celtic literature, *The Mabinogi* is the closest thing to an extended surviving tale, and scholars aren't even sure why the stories found in *The Mabinogi* are presented together. The work truly is a broken stained glass window reassembled without design – few threads link the disparate pieces of stories in the compilation, making one wonder if they were even connected to begin with. Outside of these stories, there is little to nothing that survives of the Welsh branch of Celtic mythology. The story for the Irish Celtic is little better. While we have more stories from the Irish, the stories we have are often incomplete, their meanings and purpose obscured by missing text. *The Táin*, the sole surviving full-length epic is missing, in its earliest manuscript form, a beginning. In some stories characters die, only to show up later in the same story with no explanation or mention of their apparent resurrection. We have multiple versions of the same story with contradictory details. Much of what we have is full of lacunae, with little continuity. Some stories have key pieces that are clearly grafted on at a later date, and all of the literature has been

transcribed by Irish monks, believers in Christianity, whose religious beliefs likely affected how faithfully they preserved the material and what they preserved.

At least Tolkien, being a contemporary author, must have left a more coherent picture behind, right? Wrong. The snapshot Tolkien left us of Middle Earth is just as incoherent as the Irish material. Take the *Lay of Leithian*, a story that evolved in Tolkien's writing over a period of 12 years, as an example. It exists in no fewer than eight versions, ranging from two to 200 pages in length. Tolkien is not even consistent on his main character's race – some versions gloss him as an Elf, others as human. Names of characters and races changed constantly over the 60 years that Middle Earth evolved. Fairies became Gnomes, which became Noldor, which became Elves. The place name Broseliande became Beleriand; Avallon became Eressëa, then Númenor. Luthany changed to Leithian; its meaning later altered to refer to the title of a lay (it was originally intended to refer to Britain) before finally becoming the name of a character. The inconsistencies are dizzying in both number and importance. While the state of disorder is initially shocking, it is not surprising. Middle Earth was not a story for Tolkien. It was a world. He was not inventing; he was discovering. The process was an endless one. As his knowledge of the world grew and changed, he discovered various

perspectives of Middle Earth's history, learned many new details of a very real history to him. Some of his knowledge had only begun to scratch the surface, leaving us with tantalizing pieces of stories never begun, such as "The Seven Invasions of Luthany," a story detailing seven mytho-historic invasions of a land called Luthany (meant to correspond to England), which is given all of a single paragraph in Tolkien's notes. With such inconsistencies in both Tolkien's own work and the surviving Celtic manuscripts, attempting to draw any correlations between the materials is a daunting task. It is daunting enough to even decide where to begin such a herculean effort.

Perhaps the beginning is a place to start – perhaps making an attempt to understand why the world of Middle Earth came into being at all may prove beneficial. Tolkien was fascinated by mythology and the languages that gave birth to it. For Tolkien, language was everything. It was a form of communication, a form of art, and a form of pleasure. His theory was that one had one language that intuitively called to his heart, independent of the language he grew up speaking. As he was nearly as enamored with the concept of national pride, it is no surprise that he

was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own
beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with
its tongue and soil) ... There was Greek, and Celtic, and

Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish ... but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. Of course there was and is the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing ... Do not laugh! But once upon a time ... I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story ... which I would dedicate simply to: to England; to my country.⁶

Middle Earth, then, is Tolkien's answer to such poverty. The mythology was born in 1914 with a poem, and stories were constantly added and revised throughout the rest of his life. Middle Earth was nearly 60 years in the making, still evolving on September 2, 1973 when he drew his last breath. It will live as an immense body of loosely connected legend, a collection of stories of all types, a collection forever unfinished. For such a massive task, the trope of allegory (even if Tolkien didn't hate it) would not do. It had to be something grander in scope. In the end, Tolkien pulls from a mix of legends throughout the history of the Isle to weave his own, distinct mythology. In order to weave this mythology, however, he has to

⁶ Carpenter, *Letters*, 144.

house it in a language. For that he creates Elvish, then "discovers" his mythos in its natural (Elvish) language before translating it into the English of his own country. To Tolkien, Middle Earth was not simply a fictional setting; the culmination of his work is not an imaginary world. It is a Secondary World, a world in which one can be fully immersed, a world as "true" as our own. Middle Earth is about the careful shaping of a realm that would speak to the people it was intended for, *real* in the sense that it is tied up with their spirit (whatever he saw that spirit as).

Yet, it would appear his lifelong quest to give England such a mythology was, in a sense, unsuccessful. After all, there's the Arthurian Cycle – Welsh in origin, its modern (and popular) incarnation was born in England and it is still rumored that King Arthur will return to England in its time of greatest need. Arthurian mythology, however, Tolkien rejects on the grounds that "powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and it does not replace what I felt to be missing."⁷ Tolkien felt that, while the story itself originated in Britain, it was too widespread. Claimed and originally popularized by the French, King Arthur was too universal to be considered distinctly English. So to fill this perceived void, Middle Earth was born – a world Tolkien presents as a valid mythology evoking imagery and

⁷ Carpenter, *Letters*, 144.

themes from the richly colored history of the English people, a mythology that will speak to English-speaking people on a personal level.

Still, we run into that same stumbling block: why distrust Tolkien's words that his stories are most certainly *not* Celtic? As Verlyn Flieger points out, "Tolkien went out of his way on several occasions to disavow any affinity for anything Celtic... Indeed, he explicitly and pointedly affirmed his distaste for things Celtic, rejecting the suggestion that his own work showed any Celtic influence."⁸ This in itself is a red-flag. His debts to Norse and Finnish mythology are clearly admitted, documented and discussed, so why is he so defensive about the Celtic? While slightly suspicious, the proclivity and ferocity of his denials hardly constitute a detailed look at potential Celtic influences. However, Tolkien was, first and foremost, a linguist and lover of languages. Language, to Tolkien, was the pulsing heart of mythology: "Legends depend on the language to which they belong."⁹ So it's no surprise that he crafted not one, but *two* separate Elvish dialects for his mythology. And, in a letter to Christopher Tolkien, he informs his son that he "deliberately devised to give it [Sindarin, an Elvish dialect] a linguistic character very like, though

⁸ Verlyn Flieger, *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology*, (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2005), 121.

⁹ Carpenter, *Letters*, 231.

not identical with, British-Welsh...”¹⁰ The very language of the Elves themselves owes its roots to Celtic. For a man who placed so much emphasis on language as myth, who believed that myth served as a place of residence for a language, to build a language on a Celtic model seems to necessitate a relatively Celtic set of myths to go with it.

Tolkien, in fact, goes on to explain his choice of British-Welsh as the model “because it seems to fit the rather 'Celtic' type of legends and stories told of its speakers.”¹¹ Just as with some of his stories, Tolkien presents us with a contradiction. On one hand he publicly disavows *any* Celtic connections and even goes so far as to disparage the Celtic mythological tradition. On the other, he tells his son that the legends and stories told of the Elves are rather ‘Celtic.’ How do we reconcile these disparate facts? Tolkien has also written, in a discussion on *Lord of the Rings* and language, that

All this [discussion of Tolkien’s linguistic tastes] serves only as background to the stories, though languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They [the stories] are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of

¹⁰ Carpenter, *Letters*, 176.

¹¹ Carpenter, *Letters*, 176.

linguistic taste could have a function. The stories were comparatively late in coming.¹²

It seems then, that the Elvish language came before the stories, gave birth to them. This means, if the language itself is Celtic in origin, so too must the stories be linked to the Celtic, giving us tacit permission to further explore this possibility. The door is not as tightly shut as Tolkien would have us believe...

¹² Carpenter, *Letters*, 214.

CHAPTER TWO:

A LONG EXPECTED PARTY

Norse and Germanic Influences in Tolkien's Mythology

Here, perhaps, is the one chapter of this thesis that Tolkien might consider saving from the fires of Mount Doom. His alleged disgust with Celtic mythology does not taint his public love of the Norse and Germanic myths. Coupled with Tolkien's supposed distaste for all things Celtic, this love affair explains why many skeptics would be even quicker to disregard this thesis than Tolkien himself. They would all pose the same question incredulously: "What about the Norse?! What about Beowulf?!" Perhaps they're right, what about the Norse? In fact, they are right. I do not deny Tolkien has his Norse and Germanic influences; in fact, there is much in *Lord of the Rings* that is distinctly Norse or Germanic, some of which I will now explore. The list is by no means short. One of Tolkien's favorite myths was *Beowulf*, so it is no surprise that it makes an appearance. After all, who better to borrow from when making a distinctly English mythology than the hard Anglo-Saxons, whose character the English proudly claimed to share? It is entirely likely that during his tenure as a

Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford he taught *Beowulf* nearly every year. His paper *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* was a revelation in *Beowulf* studies with lasting impact.¹³ Furthermore, he even claims himself that “*Beowulf* is among my most valued sources.”¹⁴ There is more to Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythology, however, than *Beowulf*, and that is where we’ll start – with the *other* stuff.

In the *Silmarillion*,¹⁵ Tolkien’s unfinished attempt at a definitive compilation of much of the Elven lore in the background of *Lord of the Rings*, he appears to model the distinction between two types of Elves on the Norse concept of light and dark elves. In Norse mythology, Elves are divided into “light” and “dark” elves. Light elves are not unlike the fairies presented in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, while dark elves are hostile toward humans and can inflict all kinds of injuries.”¹⁶ For Tolkien, this distinction manifests as the Elves of the Light who successfully journeyed to Valinor where they were witness to Valinor’s two light-bearing trees, and the Elves of the Dark who stayed in

¹³ Humphrey Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien: a Biography*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 143.

¹⁴ Carpenter, *Letters*, 31.

¹⁵ *The Silmarillion* was published posthumously by J.R.R. Tolkien’s son, Christopher Tolkien, in 1977.

¹⁶ Maria Nikolajeva, “Elves,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, ed. Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Web.

Middle Earth and never saw the lights.¹⁷ The line is more blurred in Tolkien's work than in Norse myth, as Tolkien's dark elves aren't *always* hostile or dangerous. However, the concept of two polar opposite types of Elves appears to have survived, coming to a head in the story of Eöl, "the dark elf,"¹⁸ who has a decidedly sinister character. He prefers the company of Dwarves, who are ever at odds with the Elves:

They [Dwarves] shall sleep now in the darkness under
stone, and shall not come forth until the Firstborn have
awakened upon Earth... but when the time comes I will
awaken them, and they shall be to thee as children; and
often strife shall arise between thine [Dwarves] and mine
[Elves].¹⁹

He also causes the death of his wife in an attempt to murder his own son. Yet, this interpretation of Elves feels simplistic. As Tolkien did not limit himself to two types of Elves, it barely scratches the surface. Further connections exist: In the Eddic accounts, the light-elves associated with the Norse gods, while for Tolkien (in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*) the Elves of the Light are most closely associated with the

¹⁷ Valinor is, essentially, the land of the gods. It is separated from Middle Earth and is only reachable by a select few. When the Elves awoke in Middle Earth the Valar themselves sent a messenger to guide the Elves, but some of the tribes got lost, refused, or were never found, becoming the Elves of the Dark.

¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 154.

¹⁹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 38.

Valar.²⁰ It is the Elves (not Men) who were created to be most like the Valar “in nature” and who remain closest to Valinor.²¹ Indeed, Men cannot even set foot in Valinor, yet it is considered the final destination and home for the Elves that do not already live there. Despite these apparent connections, Tolkien’s Elves, at least, owe Celtic tradition, as they more closely resembles the Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish Celtic mythology, a subject which will be addressed later.²²

More strongly Norse than the Elves, however, is the character Beorn, whom we first meet in *The Hobbit*, “a huge man with a thick black beard and hair, and great bare arms and legs with knotted muscles.”²³ Beorn himself is a “skin-changer” who shifts between bear and human form, with a feral fury in both skins. This evokes parallels with the *berserk* of Norse mythology, “an ancient Norse warrior who fought with wild, uncontrolled ferocity.”²⁴ The word for these Norse warriors likely comes from the old Scandinavian word *berserkr*, which translates roughly to ‘bear shirter’ or ‘bear skin.’ It is interesting that Beorn himself changes

²⁰ The Valar are the deities of the peoples of Middle Earth. In Tolkien’s concept of the world, they themselves are not gods (though they are the creations of a single God), but they *are* god-like and serve as deities to both Elves and Men.

²¹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 35.

²² See Chapter 7: The Old Forest: Elves and the Tuatha Dé Danann for a more detailed discussion.

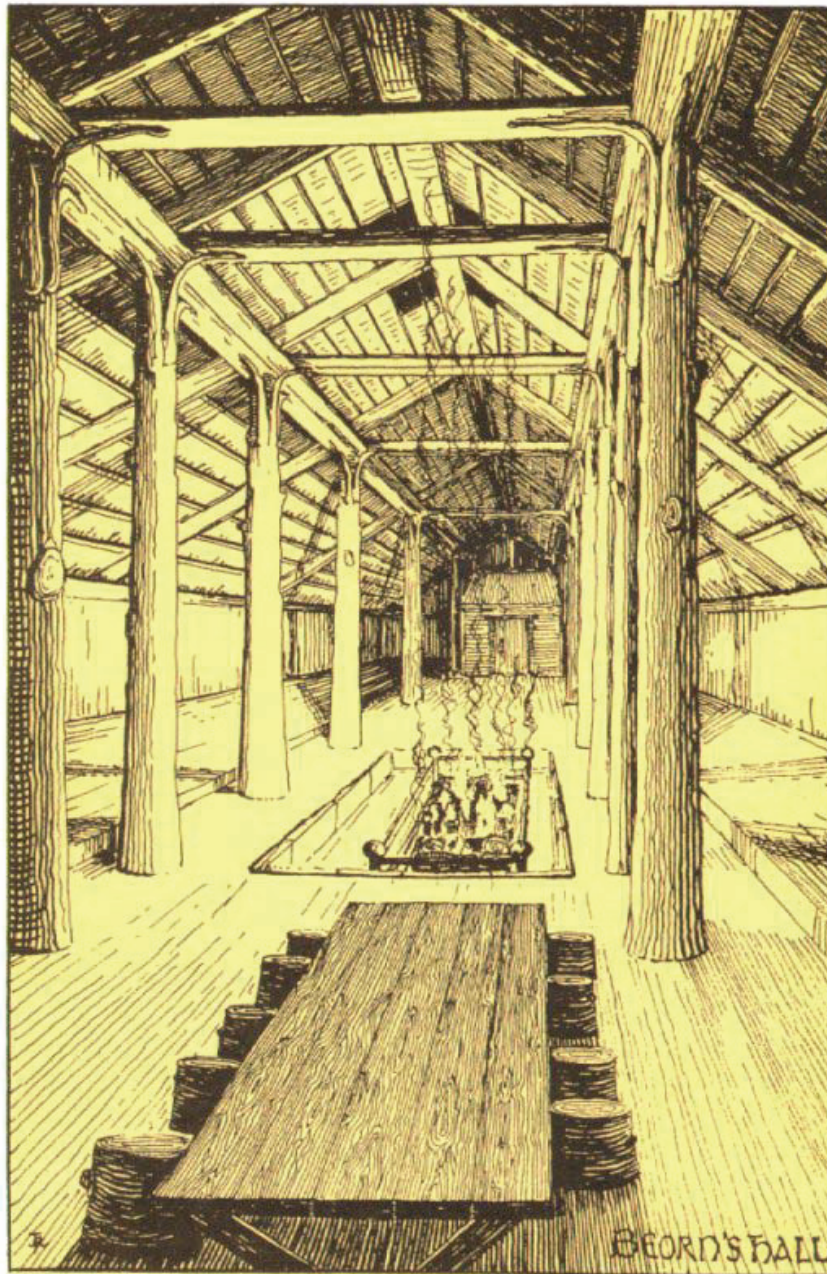
²³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Douglas A. Anderson, (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston 1988), 128.

²⁴ “Berserk,” *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, Julia Cresswell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Web.

into a bear skin and fights in a very similar fashion. Additionally, berserks were “marked out as a member of a special class free from the laws which govern ordinary members of society,”²⁵ an apt description of Beorn’s removal from society, living under his own rules. For a more specific skin-changing parallel we can look to the *Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson*, where the skin-changing ability of Kveld-Úlfr is nearly identical to Beorn’s. Furthermore, Tolkien’s description of Beorn’s hall is typical of an Anglo-Saxon or Norse hall: “they found themselves in a wide hall with a fire-place in the middle. Though it was summer there was a wood-fire burning and the smoke was rising to the blackened rafters in search of the way out through an opening in the roof. They passed through this dim hall, lit only by the fire and the hole above it, and came through another smaller door into a sort of veranda propped on wooden posts made of single tree-trunks.”²⁶ This similarity is mirrored, unsurprisingly, in Tolkien’s illustration, further serving to hammer home the Norse qualities in Beorn’s house.

²⁵ H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 66.

²⁶ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 129.



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In Beorn, then, we appear to have stumbled upon the personification of the Norse ideal: grim, self-sufficient, expecting no help

²⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*, comp. Christopher Tolkien, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 10.

from the world, loyal to those who deserve it, and, most importantly “under no enchantment but his own.”²⁸ This ideal can be seen in the Icelandic sagas, where a commonplace question and response illustrates the Norseman’s code of independence. The question is “What do you believe in?” and it is traditionally answered by “I believe in myself.” Beorn’s life is defined by the traditional answer: despite his love for Gandalf, he insists on foraging in the night to validate Gandalf’s story, he always fights alone, lives on his own and, in fact, builds his house entirely on his own relying on (and believing in) no one but himself.

As Beorn’s roots are Norse, so too are his descendents, who have been split in two camps: some “were grim men and bad” but “most were in heart like Beorn.”²⁹ This division of offspring into good and bad is eerily similar to the division of Kveld-Úlfr’s offspring. In the *Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson*, Kveld-Úlfr has two sons: one is handsome, pleasant and generous and the other is hard working but ugly and disagreeable. Finally, Beorn owes much to the title character in *Beowulf*, whose name in its literal translation means *bee-wolf* or *bee-hunter* and, through the haze of poetic kenning, refers to a bear, or, in its Anglo-Saxon form, *beorn*.³⁰ Yet,

²⁸ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 126.

²⁹ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 307.

³⁰ This etymology was first proposed by Henry Sweet in his *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, first published in 1876. He proposes that Beowulf literally means bee-

the Anglo-Saxon word for bear, *beorn*, is also the Old English heroic word for *man*. Furthermore, it is not a stretch to see Beowulf, a vicious fighter in his own right, as an incarnation of a berserker warrior. It is interesting that the *character* Beorn, a character who is a bearshirter in a literal sense, borrows his name from the Anglo-Saxon and Old English for both bear and man. Additionally, both Beorn and Beowulf are seen to return with dismembered pieces of their enemies and often display grisly remains. Both can be considered berserkers or ‘bearshirters,’ Beorn in a very literal sense as a bear shape-shifter and Beowulf in the more traditional Norse sense as a berserker warrior.

It would appear that *The Hobbit* owes more than just Beorn to *Beowulf*—monsters, dragons, dragon hoards and a dragon’s stolen cup all appear in both stories. Much criticism on Tolkien has looked into these issues deeply, and so I will only briefly explore the origins of Tolkien’s Smaug in *The Hobbit*, who owes his existence to the Norse and Germanic traditions as much (if not more) than Beorn. Like the dragon Fafnir, slain by Sigurd in *the Volsunga Saga*, Smaug is a gold-hoarding dragon whose only soft spot is his belly. As is the case with Fafnir, Smaug’s weakness is revealed to his slayer by a bird, and his slayer is the rightful king of the kingdom the dragon terrorizes. Where Fafnir desires to know his slayer’s

wolf or bee-hunter and that it is a kenning for a bear. (Henry Sweet, *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1894), 216.)

name upon his death (knowledge Sigurd refuses to divulge in fear of a curse), Smaug asks Bilbo, the thief, the same questions. Like Sigurd, Bilbo refuses to name himself in fear of a curse. Both conversations cause an unsavory pall to be thrown on the treasures: Fafnir warns Sigurd of the curse on his gold, and Smaug plants doubt in Bilbo's mind about the Dwarves' intentions. Bilbo's interactions with Smaug also play off of *Beowulf*, where the theft of a gold cup from the dragon's hoard prompts it to ravage the neighboring kingdom until slain by the king, Beowulf. Similarly, when Smaug discovers Bilbo's theft (also of a gold cup), he rains down fires of death and destruction on the Lake Men until he is slain (again, by the king). In both instances, the thief is a foreigner to the group the dragon terrorizes.

There is another dragon, Glaurung, who appears across Tolkien's literature, whose primary role is the ultimate doom in the story now published as *The Children of Húrin*.³¹ Glaurung's story also resonates with Fafnir's, but not in the same way as Smaug's. For Glaurung, it is the manner in which he is killed that evokes parallels to Fafnir. Sigurd, in order to kill Fafnir, digs a trench in the dragon's path from which to thrust upward into the dragon's belly as it passes. In *The Children of Húrin*, the

³¹ Pieces of this story have been published posthumously in many volumes of *The History of Middle Earth*. Most recently, Christopher Tolkien compiled all of the manuscripts of the story and released them as one (mostly) coherent narrative, *The Children of Húrin*, published in April 2007.

main character, Túrin, does not *dig* a trench. He merely finds a conveniently located ravine: “Therefore he purposed to creep down at dusk and descend into the ravine under night... and so come to the dragon beneath his guard.”³² Otherwise his tactics exactly mirror Sigurd’s. In both cases, having slain the dragon, the main character lives a life of sorrow and doom, complete with a tragic love-life. The details are not the same, but it remains true that, in both instances, after the slaying of the dragon, their lives take a turn for the worse.

Absent in Tolkien’s best known works but appearing in *The Silmarillion* are the Valar. As Tolkien’s creation myth for Middle Earth goes, the Ainur were led in song by an all-powerful being, Illúvatar, and it is this song that creates Middle Earth. The most powerful of the Ainur were the Valar, their leaders, who were given leave to descend into Middle Earth and watch over their creations, acting as keepers and tenders of the world for Men and Elves (known as the Children of Illúvatar).³³ Most were good-hearted and faithful to Illúvatar’s goals, but one, Melkor, was greedy, “for he coveted Arda [Middle Earth] and all that was in it, desiring

³² Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 266.

³³ The Ainur are beings created by Illúvatar before the beginning of time to keep him company (Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 4.)

the kingship of Manwë³⁴ and dominion over the realms of his peers.”³⁵ He worked against the other Valar, dwelling apart in a “vast fortress... beneath dark mountains”³⁶ and mischievously strove to ruin all they accomplished.

Interestingly, there are many parallels between the Norse trickster Loki, and Melkor, the nemesis of the Valar. In many versions of Norse mythology, Loki is held responsible for the death of Baldr, the god of (among other things), light. Similarly, Melkor “assailed the lights of Illuin and Ormal, and cast down their pillars and broke their lamps.”³⁷ Both characters are ultimately responsible for the loss of light in the world. Manwë and Tulkas (the warrior of the Valar) gave chase to Melkor, but he escaped to his fortress in the North before they could catch him. Loki, after thwarting the gods’ attempts to return Baldr to power, also fled to a fortress in the mountains with the gods on his trail. As we continue, the parallels are only more striking. Eventually, the gods (both the Norse gods and the Valar) band together and emerge in force to storm the strongholds of the tricksters (Loki and Melkor). In the end, Loki is wrestled into submission by Thor, and Melkor is wrestled into submission by Tulkas;

³⁴ Manwë and Melkor are the two most powerful of the Valar. However, because Melkor caused discord in the music of creation, Manwë was given the kingship of the Valar by Illúvatar, a fact Melkor eternally resents.

³⁵ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 23.

³⁶ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 29.

³⁷ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 29.

both are then bound in unbreakable chains and thrown into prisons far below the earth, freeing the world of their trickery. Despite their imprisonments however, their trickery lives on in more muted forms.

Though there are many more Norse influences in Tolkien's work, this thesis does not focus on them. Consequently, we will only explore one more: Odin, whose fingerprints can be seen in many places in Middle Earth. Though the connection is far from iron-clad, the beasts known as Wargs in Middle Earth were likely named with Odin in mind. In Middle Earth, Wargs appear to be wolves of our world with an extra mean streak. However, the word *wearg*, cognate with the Old Norse word *vargr*, originally described a criminal (though it now means wolf) and implied strangling. Furthermore, Odin, as "god of the hanged," was accompanied by two big, savage, greedy wolves... So the name of Tolkien's wolves is cognate with *strangling*, which reverberates with Odin, the "god of the hanged," who was accompanied by two wolves. What this means for Wargs in Middle Earth is uncertain, but Tolkien was likely cognizant of these points of contact.

A more definitive connection can be seen in the character of Gandalf, whom casual readers often connect with Merlin the wizard. This simplistic view (and association with a modern conception of an ancient character) leaves much to be desired. His very name, *Gandalf*, is taken

from *The Poetic Edda*'s "Catalogue of Dwarfs," implying at least *some* Norse roots.³⁸ In fact, Gandalf's character appears inextricably linked to the Norse god Odin. This may seem to be a tenuous connection, at least on the surface. While Odin is best known as a god of battle, Gandalf is clearly one of Tolkien's most benevolent, peace-seeking characters. Yet, as H.R. Ellis Davidson suggests, in many of the stories about Odin "the implication is clear: Odin cannot be trusted."³⁹ A similar sentiment is often echoed about Gandalf by characters in *Lord of the Rings*, such as when Gandalf arrives in the hall of King Théoden, Lord of the Mark: "*Lathspell* I name you, Illnews; and ill news is an ill guest they say."⁴⁰ Also of interest is the duality of Odin's legacy as both the Arch-Deceiver and the god of Inspiration, a duality similarly witnessed in Gandalf's character in *Lord of the Rings*, particularly emphasized when he reaches the gates of Minis Tirith. Inside the beleaguered city, the Steward greets him with naught but suspicion, believing Gandalf brings ill-will and deception. However, while the Steward sits in his hall uninvolved in the city defenses, it is said that "so it was that Gandalf took command of the last defense of the City of Gondor. Wherever he came men's hearts would

³⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 416.

³⁹ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 50.

⁴⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 139.

lift again, and the winged shadows pass from memory.”⁴¹ Further contact points exist in Odin’s role as the god of battle. Admittedly, this seems a strange comparison at first: Gandalf is hardly a battle thirsty individual. On closer inspection however, Odin performs his role as god of battle in the form of a lord of hosts and, more importantly, a *bringer of victory*.⁴² Many times, when a battle seems lost and hopeless, it is the work of Gandalf that brings a fresh host into the fray, and with it, victory. For example, when the riders of Rohan are assailed at their ancient stronghold, Helm’s Deep, Gandalf departs before the battle and tells them “Ride to Helm’s Deep!... Keep well the Lord of the Mark, till I return. Await me at Helm’s Gate!”⁴³ At Helm’s Deep they find themselves quickly besieged in a battle of unending darkness and despair, until “suddenly upon a ridge appeared a rider, clad in white, shining in the rising sun... The White Rider was upon them [the enemy], and the terror of his coming filled the enemy with madness.”⁴⁴ With Gandalf’s arrival at the battle, victory is had. Despite the seemingly awkward initial comparison, if one consults the text one can see that Gandalf *does* act as a bringer of victory and a lord of hosts, just as Odin does.

⁴¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 107.

⁴² Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 54.

⁴³ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 156.

⁴⁴ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 172.

In order to bring victory, however, one must have a means of transportation befitting one's station. Luckily, Odin and Gandalf are both in possession of remarkable horses. Odin rides Sleipnir, an eight-legged beauty that can transport men and gods alike from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, and is known to ride through the air and at great speeds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he has many similarities with Gandalf's Shadowfax. While Sleipnir is grey, it is said of Shadowfax that "by day his coat glistens like silver; and by night it is like a shade, and he passes unseen."⁴⁵ In conjunction with the shadowy implications of a word like "shade," Shadowfax is most often depicted in scenes of shadow or twilight, suggesting a connection to a darker world (such as the world of the dead). He is descended from a sire that "knew the speech of Men"⁴⁶ (Sleipnir is allegedly offspring of Loki)⁴⁷ and appears immune from terror, attuned to the world of the dead, as Sleipnir is. He, alone of all the horses, is un-fazed by the personification of death, the Nazgûl horror, remaining as "unmoving, steadfast as a graven image"⁴⁸ when he confronts the Nazgûl. Though he does not actually fly, as Sleipnir does, he is described as having a flying pace and is often associated with the wind when he

⁴⁵ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 315.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 44.

⁴⁷ "Sleipnir," *A Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Ed. Elizabeth Knowles, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Web.

⁴⁸ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 113.

moves. Both horses allow their riders to engage in superhuman feats of travel.

Throughout legend, Odin travels by many names. Gandalf too, travels under many names. Interestingly, many of Odin's aliases are either shared by Gandalf directly or perfectly describe him, such as Long Hood, Long Beard, Greybeard, Bearer of the Wand, One Who Rides Forth, Wayweary, Wayfarer and Wanderer. Both characters wander through their own Middle Earth as grey-bearded old men, carrying a staff and wearing either a hood or a cloak (blue in color) and a wide-brimmed floppy hat. Tolkien even goes so far as to describe Gandalf as "the Odinic wanderer"⁴⁹ in a letter to his publisher. Furthermore, if we return to the wolf/warg connection, they (Gandalf and Odin) are pulled even closer together. Gandalf takes the lead defensive role in scenes with Wargs and wolves throughout the books, just as Odin rushes into Ragnarok first to take on Fenrir, Loki's wolf-son. Tolkien, however, takes care to make a distinction between Gandalf and Odin (who met an untimely end in Fenrir's belly) by having Sam claim that "Whatever is in store for old Gandalf, it isn't a wolf's belly."⁵⁰ Though Tolkien allows Gandalf to survive his encounter with wolves; he deftly weaves echoes of Odin's demise in homage to the god who helped birth Gandalf.

⁴⁹ Carpenter, *Letters*, 119.

⁵⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 355.

CHAPTER THREE:

A SHORT CUT TO MUSHROOMS

King Arthur in Middle Earth

Moving away from the Norse, let us return, for a moment, to Tolkien's desire for a body of distinctly English mythology. While many consider Arthur *the* premier example of English mythology, Tolkien disqualifies him in the same letter (to Milton Waldman) in which he voices a desire for a distinctly English mythology: "Of course there was and is the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing."⁵¹ Though many would consider the Arthurian material an already established English mythology, its form (as we know it today) more closely resembles medieval romance than myth, with little temporal proximity to the mythological period itself. Tolkien measures it against his desire and finds it wanting, subsequently discarding it. Or so it would seem. On closer inspection of Tolkien's work, we see that King Arthur had a place in Tolkien's mythology and heart, despite his supposed rejection of the body of work. Nearly a decade before

⁵¹ Carpenter, *Letters*, 144.

his letter to Waldman, Tolkien attempted to write his own Arthurian legend in the form of an epic poem, *The Fall of Arthur*. Furthermore, in 1955, four years *after* his letter to Waldman, he still hoped to finish it. “I write alliterative verse with pleasure, though I have published little beyond the fragments in *The Lord of the Rings*... I still hope to finish a long poem on *The Fall of Arthur* in the same measure.”⁵² True, *The Fall of Arthur* has nothing to do with Middle Earth directly, but it is important to note Tolkien’s hopes of finishing the poem as they show continued engagement with the Arthurian material throughout the course of his life.

In rejecting Arthurian Literature, Tolkien takes it upon himself to provide a valid mythology, a mythology in which *Lord of the Rings* is one of many stories. His hope is that

It [his mythology of Middle Earth] should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our “air” and while possessing the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic, it should be “high,” purged of the gross... I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole,

⁵² Carpenter, *Letters*, 219.

and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding
 paint and music and drama.⁵³

Interestingly enough, this description, which Tolkien gave of his own work, very accurately and completely describes the state of Arthurian literature as well. It is as if Tolkien, in the organic process of the ongoing creation of Middle Earth, used the Arthurian blueprint to make his own writings seem more “real.” His process began with poems, which were later transferred into prose. He wrote conflicting narratives, some from differing viewpoints, leaving some tales barely begun as his interest was drawn in other directions toward tales fully formed. The surviving literature of Middle Earth parallels very nearly the surviving literature of King Arthur in form, if not in scope. That Tolkien may have borrowed from the form of Arthurian literature is further evident in the evolution of some prominent names he uses: the land of Númenor was, at one point, named Avallon (a name directly from Arthurian literature) and the realm of Beleriand was originally called Broceliande, recalling the magical Breton forest of Brocéliande.

Besides this parallel form, Tolkien has borrowed from some key pieces of the literature itself. And, despite the many transformations King Arthur has undergone as he was passed from culture to culture, the legend

⁵³ Carpenter, *Letters*, 144.

is, in its original form, Celtic. So, perhaps here we will get to something Celtic, albeit a washed-out and recycled sort of Celtic.

Once again, Gandalf appears promising. He evokes similarities to the wizened wizard of Arthurian Literature, Merlin, himself derived from the Welsh Celtic Wildman Myrddin.⁵⁴ Both Gandalf and Merlin advise their self-appointed charges (Frodo/Aragorn and Arthur, respectively) and both characters assist their charges in battle some of the time, disappearing in trying circumstances and leaving their charges to prove themselves. They both devote much of their time to helping lay the groundwork for the success of their charges: Gandalf sets Frodo up to succeed in his quest and Aragorn to claim his rightful kingship, while Merlin sets Arthur up to claim a kingship of his own. While both wizards are integral to the success of their charges, they both seem to disappear when it is time to take credit for said success, leaving their charges to bask in the limelight. Both characters also share magic, wisdom, power and a sense of humor, often casting themselves as beggars. They both depart from their charges in moments of crisis, but often appear unlooked for to save the day when the day needs saving. Furthermore, both are, well, *wizards*. These connections to Merlin are, however, only skin deep. Most of these connections can (and have been) explained more directly through the lens of Odin. It is

⁵⁴ For a discussion on the welsh Wildmen, see Brian Frykenberg.

likely that Merlin's greatest influence on Gandalf was as a prophet and a gentle heart, something that Odin most certainly was not.

Túrin, who was mentioned previously, also shares both Norse and potential Celtic influences. He may owe some key portions of his tragic life to a little-known Arthurian character, or more specifically, the sword that Balin, brother of Balan, wields. Both Túrin and Balin meet their doom and mete out the doom of their own brothers with their respective cursed swords. Balan and Balin are brothers in arms (and blood), whose story revolves around a mysterious sword that Balin takes, despite a warning from the Lady of the Lake: "Ye are not wise to keep the sword from me, for ye shall slay with the sword the best friend that ye have, and the man that ye most love in the world, and the sword shall be your destruction."⁵⁵ Through this sword, Balin accidentally kills his brother, Balan, whom he mistakes for a foe. Balin mourns his brother's death, even as he lies dying himself, his eventual death caused by his now-dead brother. Beleg Cúthalion, the closest thing to a brother Túrin ever knew, is also the recipient of a cursed sword and receives a warning from Melian (who herself is very like the Lady of the Lake): "There is malice in this sword. The heart of the smith still dwells in it, and that heart was dark. It will not

⁵⁵ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur: Volume I*, ed. Janet Cowen, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 63.

love the hand that it serves; neither will it abide with you long.”⁵⁶ True, the prophecy is not as dire, nor as explicit. However, in the story of Túrin the prophecy is acted out exactly as the Lady of the Lake foretold. In a moment of confusion, just as Beleg has freed Túrin from the bonds of Orcs,⁵⁷ Túrin takes up Beleg’s sword and slays him, thinking him a foe. And so the doom of Balin and Balan has fallen upon Beleg and Túrin. Túrin is so riddled with grief he is struck mute, led as if he were an unintelligent child across miles of terrain before he finally voices what Tolkien claims is one of the saddest songs to grace Middle Earth. The prophecy continues to be fulfilled, as Túrin retains the sword, which becomes a harbinger of doom in his hands, and eventually drinks of his own blood: “Yes, I will drink your [Túrin’s] blood, that I may forget the blood of Beleg my master.”⁵⁸ The sword, then, causes Túrin’s death as well. It is interesting that it is in the name of Beleg that the sword slays Túrin – just as Balin slays Balan and Balan slays Balin, so too Túrin slays Beleg and Beleg slays Túrin. (This story, in Arthurian legend, appears doomed to repeat itself as Merlin says “there shall never man handle this sword but the best knight of the world... and Launcelot with this sword

⁵⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 97.

⁵⁷ In Middle Earth, Orcs are a race of evil beings created through a process of twisting and corrupting Elven souls.

⁵⁸ Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin*, 256.

shall slay the man that in the world he loved best, that shall be Sir Gawain.”⁵⁹)

Balin’s sword is not the only sword from Arthurian legend to contribute to Tolkien’s masterpiece. Another sword, a sword of great fame, also makes its mark. It is Excalibur, property of King Arthur, which lends its properties to the sword Andúril (which was reforged from the shards of King Isildur’s sword Narsil), property of Aragorn. Both swords are purported to have mythological and supernatural powers, and both are to be used only in the direst of circumstances. In Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Merlin instructs Arthur: ““Sir... fight not with the sword that ye had by miracle, till that ye see ye go unto the worse, then draw it out and do your best.””⁶⁰ Similarly, Aragorn refrains from drawing Andúril until he must. Both swords also serve to legitimize the kingship of their respective owners. Though the kingship is Arthur’s birthright, his birth is shrouded in mystery and it takes the challenge of the sword in the stone to legitimize his kingship in his many contenders’ eyes. Similarly, when “Strider” reveals himself as Aragorn (heir to the throne of Gondor), Boromir (heir to the stewardship) is suspicious. Though Aragorn claims to be of royal lineage, his word supported by Gandalf himself, it takes the shards of Narsil (which are reforged into Andúril) that Aragorn reveals

⁵⁹ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur: Volume 1*, 90.

⁶⁰ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur: Volume 1*, 23.

during a council in Rivendell to convince Boromir of his legitimacy as heir to the Kingship.⁶¹

Both swords are also used as a rallying cry. In Malory, when Arthur's first battle against the defiant kings seems lost, he pulls out Excalibur and performs magnificent feats that rally his allies to victory.⁶² In Tolkien, Andúril serves a similar purpose in the seemingly hopeless battle for Helms Deep: "Charging from the side, they hurled themselves upon the wild men. Andúril rose and fell, gleaming with white fire. A shout went up from wall and tower: 'Andúril! Andúril goes to war. The Blade that was Broken shines again!' ...Three times Aragorn and Éomer rallied them, and three times Andúril flamed in a desperate charge that drove the enemy from the wall."⁶³ It appears each sword bestows a certain strength upon its user, a strength that permeates into the wielder's allies, allowing them to prevail in the direst of circumstances.

Aragorn owes more than just his sword to Arthur, however. It appears that part of his life story is actually derived from Arthur himself. While the Aragorn from *The Fellowship of the Ring* doesn't much resemble King Arthur in all his resplendent glory, the *Return of the King* gives us an Aragorn that is the spitting image of a youthful King Arthur.

⁶¹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 296-7.

⁶² Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur: Volume 1*, 23.

⁶³ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 163.

Their paths to such a glory have many points of contact. Both are raised by foster parents (Sir Ector in Arthur's case and Elrond in Aragorn's). They both lead quiet childhoods until events in their world suddenly become chaotic (the unexpected death of Uther and the finding of the Ring). It is through this chaos they are catapulted from the shadows of obscurity and secret backgrounds to a place of ultimate power by a wizard (Merlin or Gandalf). Both serve to reunite warring factions of men. Both wield a legendary sword. Yet, Aragorn succeeds where Arthur fails, and their paths split. While Arthur departs to Avalon without truly dying, Aragorn lives to an old age and dies peacefully. Where did the second half of Arthur's story go? To Frodo, the counterpoint to Aragorn in Tolkien's work.

In Frodo and Aragorn, Tolkien contrasts two different modes of heroism. Frodo embodies the spiritual hero, while Aragorn represents the chivalrous martial hero. Aragorn's quest is a kingly quest: to bring a new era of peace and order to a chaotic world. He has nothing to lose and everything to gain. Frodo's quest is the spiritual one; he will give up everything he has, himself included, and his sacrifices will go unnoticed by his people, though it is Frodo's sacrifice that saves the world. In Aragorn, one can see the makings of an archetypal heroic upbringing; using Lord Raglan's 22 point outline of a hero's life, Aragorn scores a 13,

about the same as Robin Hood.⁶⁴ But Aragorn only conforms to the rise of a hero; he does not conform to the pattern of the hero's final, tragic death. Frodo, however, is the opposite. He has a very normal childhood, scoring low on the hero scale until he finds the ring. It is at this point that Frodo begins to assume the heroic mantle, culminating in the tragic end one would expect for a hero. Only by looking at these two characters together as inextricably linked pieces of a character archetype can one understand the depth Tolkien provides, and the degree to which Arthur impacts the story.

Accepting the intertwining of Frodo and Aragorn, it is unsurprising that Aragorn receives all the martial acclaim that Arthur did, while Frodo meets the spiritual end that Arthur does. Arthur is given a final wound by Mordred, his mortal foil, while Frodo is given a final wound by Gollum, the fallen ring bearer. These wounds eventually cause the departures of their respective characters. When they do depart, both characters do so in remarkably similar ways. Both depart from the world to Isles of the otherworld (Avalon and Valinor) and both leave behind a stalwart companion. Compare Malory's description of Arthur's departure:

Then Sir Bedevere cried, 'Ah my lord Arthur, what shall
become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone

⁶⁴ Leslie E. Jones, *Myth and Middle Earth*, (New York: Cold Springs Press, 2002), 113.

among mine enemies?’ ‘Comfort thyself,’ said the king,
 ‘and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to
 trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my
 grievous wound...’ And as soon as Sir Bedevere had lost
 the sight of the barge, he wept and wailed...⁶⁵

to Tolkien’s description of Frodo’s departure:

‘But,’ said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, ‘I thought you
 were going to enjoy the shire, too, for years and years, after
 all you had done.’ ‘So I thought too, once. But I have been
 too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has
 been saved, but not for me...’ Then Frodo went aboard...
 and then slowly the ship slipped away... and the light of
 the glass of Galadriel that Frodo bore glimmered and was
 lost...⁶⁶

In both instances, the writer ends the scene with a stalwart companion,
 who was there unto the end, standing on a bank as the hero sails off to a
 distant island otherworld where he can recuperate and avoid a worldly
 death.

⁶⁵ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur: Volume 2*, ed. Janet Cowen, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 517-8.

⁶⁶ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 345-7.

While we are on the topic of Arthur-like characters and roles, Elrond deserves a brief word. The connections between Elrond and Arthur are rather general and of little consequence to the argument as a whole, presented here more as an intriguing possibility than anything else. After all, Tolkien has drawn from Arthur's rise to power in Aragorn, and his fall in Frodo, but neither of them draws much from Arthur *while* he is in power. Elrond, however, does. Calling Arthurian romances "Arthurian" is a bit of a misnomer; while they do deal with "Arthur's court", Arthur himself often plays a peripheral role. Arthur and his round table serve as the springboard from which Arthurian romance departs, and the reader does not see Arthur again until the hero returns to Arthur's court, which itself serves as the witness to the vital transitions in the story. Elrond plays this same role. As Arthur typically does in the romances, Elrond catches wind of a quest (the destruction of the ring of power) and sends for all of his most esteemed and accomplished companions. It is from this convention that a quest begins, just as in the romances it is from Arthur's court that the quest is undertaken. Elrond, like Arthur, is presumed to be a great warrior, but the only glimpse of Elrond in action is given in recollection of his past endeavors, just as with Arthur in the romances.

CHAPTER FOUR: ON THE DOORSTEP

Surface Connections

Tolkien, then, certainly borrowed from Arthurian tradition. Of course, Arthurian legend is Celtic, but only sort of. The legends of Arthur as presented in *The Mabinogi* (their Celtic originals) are a far cry from what we now consider the standard for Arthurian mythology, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which itself is based on a transmogrified set of legends and borrows from many distinctly different cultures. However, King Arthur still is Celtic... That's where the wild assertion that Tolkien borrowed from Celtic mythology comes from, right? Wrong. If one approaches Middle Earth with a mind that is simply *open* to the notion that Tolkien may have tactfully misspoke when he claimed "needless to say they are not Celtic! Neither are the tales,"⁶⁷ then even a cursory glance reveals a certain Celtic quality about his stories. For example, Tolkien envisioned *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as pieces of a much larger manuscript that also included, among other things, *The Silmarillion*.

⁶⁷ Carpenter, *Letters*, 26.

The name of this fictional manuscript is *The Red Book of Westmarch*, significant because a real Welsh manuscript exists that contains much of what we know about Welsh Celtic mythology, including *The Mabinogi*. The Welsh manuscript isn't, however, named *The Red Book of Westmarch*, but *The Red Book of Hergest*. Both names are a product of the color of their covers (red) and the location they were found in. With names so similar, it is by no means a stretch to think the books themselves are connected. And for someone who feels "names are... inextricable from the stories"⁶⁸ it is at least plausible that the contents of the *Red Book of Westmarch* are painted with a Celtic veneer. This also seems to suggest the possibility that *The Silmarillion*, a seemingly disjointed collection of Elvish legends, drew from *The Mabinogi*, an equally disjointed collection of Welsh legends, in structure.

There is precedent in Tolkien's work for drawing on Welsh Celtic structural forms. As was mentioned previously, the tale of *The Children of Húrin* exists in eight different forms. One of them is a long epic poem appearing in *The Lays of Beleriand*, which employs an unusual alliterative device. Tolkien breaks each line in the middle with a caesura and the lines generally consist of internal alliteration: the beginning consonants of the

⁶⁸ Carpenter, *Letters*, 214.

important words on each side of the line resonate with each other. For example:

Thus the **t**wain were **t**racked **t**ill the **t**rees **t**hickened
 And the **r**iver went rushing **r**eath a **r**ising bank
 In **f**oam **h**astened **o**'er the **f**eet of the **h**ills.⁶⁹

Interestingly enough, there is a device in Welsh language poetry known as *cynghanedd*,

an alliterative device which, arising from some innate tendency of the Welsh language and the national feeling for words, began to manifest itself from the very beginnings of Welsh poetry... In principle the line falls into two parts and each consonant in the first part must be answered by the same consonant in the second part.⁷⁰

This description rather aptly describes what it is Tolkien was apparently trying to do. While Welsh *cynghanedd* often seems somewhat senseless because the Welsh poets valued sound over meaning, Tolkien clearly valued meaning. Yet Tolkien, certainly no stranger to *cynghanedd*, seems to have used it in *The Lay of the Children of Húrin*. As one can see, he did not do a perfect job. It falls apart slightly in the second line, but to do it at

⁶⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lays of Beleriand*, ed. Christopher R. Tolkien, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 77.

⁷⁰ Thomas Parry, *A History of Welsh Literature*, trans. H. Idris Bell, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), 122-123.

all in a poem valuing meaning over sound is quite a feat, and most certainly not an accidental one.

Any attentive reader of *The Hobbit* (even if the reader insists on only looking at the pictures) will notice another Celtic structural connection upon observing Tolkien's drawing of the Elven-King's gates in Mirkwood. One can clearly see a direct resemblance in shape, style and atmosphere to Newgrange,⁷¹ the largest Neolithic monument in Ireland and a common access point to the Otherworld in Celtic mythology. As will be shown later, many of the Elven realms in Tolkien's world owe their character to the Celtic notion of the Otherworld as well, making the resemblance all the more striking.⁷²

The broad surface details that Tolkien owes to Celtic tradition don't stop there. Tolkien's One Ring (which makes its wearer invisible) suggests similarities to the stone ring of Luned, one of the 13 treasures of the Island of Britain, whose power is such that "as long as thou concealest it [the stone or the ring], it will conceal thee."⁷³ Furthermore, in *Lludd and Lleueyls*, three evils plague the land: an all-knowing race arises; a shriek goes over the land annually (incapacitating men, driving all others mad

⁷¹ Newgrange is also known as Brug na Bóinne.

⁷² Tolkien's drawing and a picture of Newgrange can be found in Chapter 8 (The Forbidden Pool: Celtic Otherworlds in Middle Earth), when the influence of Celtic Otherworlds is discussed in more detail.

⁷³ Lady Charlotte Guest, *The Mabinogian*, (Chicago: Academy Press Limited, 1978), 13.

and leaving animals, the earth, and even the waters barren); and what little is produced from the fields survives only one day. In *The Lord of the Rings*, we have some suspicious parallels: Sauron rises, nearly all-knowing as his threat lies over Middle Earth; the cries of the Nazgûl unman even the strongest warriors, “a blind fear and a deadly cold fell on them. Cowering they looked up... The star fainted before it [the Nazgûl]”⁷⁴ and in their wake death follows; barrenness and sterility are on the increase, and even the notion of a disappearing harvest is suggested by the depletion of the Shire in *The Return of the King*.

Tolkien’s obsession with the idea of a rightful King of all men is also strikingly similar to the Celtic Irish obsession with Kingship. Where the Irish have the *Lia Fáil* that cries out under the destined king, and that is flanked by the two flagstones Blocc and Bluigne closed to all except the rightful king (for whom they’d open as a symbol of rebirth), Tolkien has the passage through the mountain that Aragorn must travel where only the rightful King may go.⁷⁵ He enters the path a ranger, and is reborn as King of Gondor when the dead allow him passage. While Aragorn is in the passage of the dead, he appears to draw from Welsh mythology where, in

⁷⁴ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 237.

⁷⁵ In an attempt to muster up armies to defend the Kingdom of Gondor (of which Aragorn is the rightful King), Aragorn walks the path of the dead to summon an army bound to the word of Gondor’s King. This is the first time he claims Kingship of Gondor, and it is his success on this trip that, in a sense, validates his claim as the rightful king.

The Mabinogi, the proverb “he who is chief shall be a bridge”⁷⁶ is given story form. In this instance, the King figure of the men of the Isle of Mighty acts as a bridge between this world and the Otherworld, being the only thing able to bridge the gap. Similarly, Aragorn acts as a bridge between the mortal realm and the realm of the dead, being the only thing able to bridge the gap and bring the dead back to life.

Bridging the gap from surface connections into deeper implications, we turn now to Tolkien’s choice of details. Of particular interest is the way he uses specific numbers. Admittedly, this is unstable ground to tread with the heavy feet of certainty, as nearly every mythology loves numbers. So instead, we’ll tread with a lighter step, one which merely implies that the significance of these numbers *might* be Celtic. In particular Tolkien makes repeated use of the numbers three, five, seven and nine, numbers that were especially loved by the Celts. Taking into account the fact that other things Celtic do show up in Middle Earth, it is not out of the question that Tolkien chose these numbers, so beloved by the Celts, with the Celts in mind. Begin with an examination of the number five. In *The Hobbit*, the riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum lasts five riddles, and five armies meet in The Battle of Five Armies. As Alywn and Brinley Rees point out in their book *Celtic Heritage*, every

⁷⁶ Patrick K. Ford, trans., *The Mabinogi*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 67.

cairn in Ireland seems to represent the whole and “the learned assert that every place wherein there are five stones, or any five things is properly called a cairn.”⁷⁷ They assert that the number five “appears in a large number of significant contexts”⁷⁸ and in the litany of examples they proceed to give one theme is constant: the number five *represents the whole*. Certainly, the number five is a significant number in other mythological traditions, but it seems telling that Tolkien uses the number five in a way very in tune with Celtic tradition. The riddle contest lasts five riddles, not six riddles: six does not represent the whole, while five does. In the Battle of Five Armies, we are led to believe the five armies gathered represent the entirety of the world, and again Tolkien uses the number five to indicate that a whole is present. Though he is less explicit in his usage of the number in *The Lord of the Rings*, again we have representatives of five kingdoms fighting for Middle Earth: Gondor, Rohan, Lothlórien, the Shire, and the Dwarves. There is a sixth “kingdom” in the war, Mordor, but those who fight for it are creatures *not of Middle Earth*, and hence, not part of the whole, which is symbolized by the *five* kingdoms fighting. Other kingdoms do exist, but they all disappear after this battle, as they are not part of the symbolic whole of Middle Earth.

⁷⁷ Alwyn D. Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 188.

⁷⁸ Rees & Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 189.

Another important number in Celtic mythology is the number nine. Again, the fascination with this number is shared by many cultures, but it is particularly important in Celtic tradition. And, though Tolkien disavowed any Celtic connection, it seems we are beginning to learn his statements on the matter cannot be taken at face value. Again, relying on Rees & Rees, “Irish literature abounds with ‘companies of nine’, and in a considerable number of cases it is made clear that the nine consist of a leader and eight others.”⁷⁹ Nine, like five, symbolized a whole in Celtic mythology. This is strikingly illustrated in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in which the fellowship consists of *nine* individuals, or, more specifically, one leader (Frodo, the ring-bearer) and eight companions. These nine companions, arranged in a very Celtic fashion, represent the hopes of the whole of Middle Earth as they embark upon their quest. Nine also factors into the number of rings given to the Kings of men. A further parallel with the nine exists in the Irish story, *Bricriu’s Feast*. In the story, Bricriu holds a great feast for the men of Ulster, building *nine* rooms for Conchubor. However, knowing the men of Ulster would refuse to allow Bricriu to be present (as he is a trouble-maker), Bricriu made himself a secret room in the shadows from which he could watch and control the mayhem he caused. In this story we have a character that gifts kings with nine

⁷⁹ Rees & Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 193.

identical gifts but makes a secret one for himself in the shadows to control them. Similarly, Sauron gifted the kings of men with *nine* rings of power, but made a secret one for himself in the shadows to control them.

Interestingly enough, the numbers of rings given to *each race* corresponds to a powerful number in Celtic mythology. Again, one cannot dismiss the fact that many cultures share affinities for the same numbers. Still it is entirely possible (and in some instances, likely) that Tolkien had Celtic mythology in mind when he wrote:

three rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
 Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
 Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
 One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
 In the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.⁸⁰

In these few lines alone, we find a treasure trove of numbers dripping in Celtic significance. There are three rings for the Elven-kings. True, three is a very common number in mythology, but Celtic mythology is full of triadic divinities (such as the Mórrígan) and “for the Celts it would seem that they [triad divinity groups] must have embodied a rich and vital symbolism.”⁸¹ In Middle Earth, the three ring-bearers in the third age are

⁸⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 75.

⁸¹ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, (New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1970), 49.

Gandalf, Galadriel and Elrond – all three of whom are portrayed as divine-like figures. Similarly, we learn that “only three remain of the first Ents that walked in the woods before the Darkness.”⁸² Perhaps, in this number of three, a triad divinity is at work. As three beings often composed a single divinity, it would seem that three, like five and nine, can be considered a symbolic whole.

And, in fact, when we consider it, triad divinity groups abound in Middle Earth. Look, for example, at *Lord of the Rings*. We have the triad divinity of the warrior, embodied in Legolas, Aragorn and Gimli, who, as in the Celtic tradition “share a functional identity”⁸³ as trackers of Orcs, driven by a sense of justice and revenge. In battle, we see the presence of all of them, or the presence of none of them. They represent a triad of different qualities in an ideal warrior: strength (Gimli), speed (Legolas) and stamina (Aragorn). We have the triad divinity of the ring bearer in Frodo, Bilbo and Gollum. Again, the three share a functional identity as ring-bearers, and again, they are separated by the different characteristics inherent to being a ring-bearer that they reflect. Gollum represents the fallen, twisted bearer who cannot escape; Frodo the fight between the ring and its owner, and Bilbo the ancient and wise ring bearer who has escaped its clutches.

⁸² Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 91.

⁸³ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 48

Seven rings for the Dwarf-lords can also be seen as distinctly Celtic, as “seven and nine appear as alternatives in a number of contexts.”⁸⁴ Seven then, like nine, represents a whole in Celtic mythology. For example, in *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*, we are explicitly told that seven constitutes a whole: “There are seven doorways into the house [Da Derga’s hostel].”⁸⁵ Seven sees a more subtle use in *The Death of Cúchulainn* when Calatín claims the work of making weapons powerful enough to kill Cúchulainn is “the work of a week [there are seven days in a week] is the work of seven years, that is, a day every year to be spent in making the spears.”⁸⁶ Here, Calatín implies that they will need seven years to complete the *whole* work in such a way that the objective can be achieved. Establishing seven as another “whole” number in Celtic mythology, we have seven dwarf-kings in Middle Earth receiving seven rings, representative of the entire race of dwarves. Seven appears again in the seven sons of Fëanor, leaders of the entirety of the Elven peoples who come to Middle Earth from Valinor. And, as was addressed previously, nine kings of men received rings, another symbolic whole. Furthermore, when they were turned by Sauron and became servants of his will as black, wraithlike figures (the Nazgûl), they became eight Nazgûl and one

⁸⁴ Rees & Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 195.

⁸⁵ J.T. Koch, ed. and J. Carey, ed., *The Celtic Heroic Age*, (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), 172.

⁸⁶ Koch and Carey, *Celtic Heroic Age*, 134.

leader, the Witch King, a Celtic arrangement of a leader and eight companions.

CHAPTER FIVE:

QUEER LODGINGS

Developing a Celtic Setting

When Tolkien set out to “discover” his mythology, the goal was not to draw his readers into willing suspension of disbelief, which he considers a “somewhat tired, shabby, or sentimental state of mind,”⁸⁷ but to create belief, to forge a world that draws his readers into it, literally. “What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true.’”⁸⁸ The use of Celtic numbers sprinkled throughout this Secondary World Tolkien created leaves it with slightly Celtic undertones. And, if the numbers were the extent of the Celtic influences in Tolkien’s world, then those undertones would likely go unnoticed. However, the setting Tolkien creates is very Celtic in feel, and a deeper inspection yields more details, more stories and more happenstances that may owe their existence to Celtic mythology.

⁸⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien, Reader*, (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1966), 61.

⁸⁸ Tolkien, *The Tolkien, Reader* 60.

Take, for example, the council of Elrond. Here we have representatives from all the “good” races in Middle Earth: Elves, Hobbits, Men, Dwarves and even a Wizard. When the decision of what to do with the ring is finally reached – “we must take a hard road, a road unforeseen. There lies our hope, if hope it be. To walk into peril – to Mordor. We must send the Ring to the Fire”⁸⁹ – it appears all hope is lost. Yet despite the dire situation, the suicidal nature of this solution, and being supremely under qualified, Frodo unhesitatingly steps up and says “I will take the ring... though I do not know the way.”⁹⁰ This sort of decision is characteristic of the Heroic Cycle of Irish Celtic literature, wherein “the hero justifies himself by his unhesitating choice between dire alternatives and by the resolute way he follows his chosen path though he fully realizes where it will lead him.”⁹¹ Frodo knows full well that he is marching into the maw of Hell and fully expects to die in the completion of his mission. Yet he resolutely trudges on, step by step, giving his quest a quasi-Celtic feel. True, such unwavering dedication is a characteristic of many mythologies and heroic literatures, but we can do better than a Celtic influence that could be attributed to other mythologies as well.

⁸⁹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 320.

⁹⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 324.

⁹¹ Rees & Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 61.

For a more uniquely Celtic influence, we turn to some of the stranger creatures in *The Lord of the Rings*: Ents. The Ents are tree-herders, sentient beings that are very like trees in appearance and mannerisms. In fact, as Treebeard, the first Ent we meet, says, “many [Ents] are growing sleepy, going tree-ish as you might say.”⁹² Eventually, they march on Isengard and overthrow the evil wizard Saruman, eliciting images of the March of Birnam Wood from *Macbeth*. But there is a deeper, distinctly Celtic quality to these tree-like warriors that such an explanation fails to adequately address. It is not Shakespeare’s army disguised in branches that marches to war, but *the trees themselves*, woken from long slumber, who march in an attempt to obstruct Saruman from fighting elsewhere. For these lively trees, Tolkien likely drew from the *Cad Goddeu*, “The Battle of the Trees,” a rather opaque poem commonly attributed to the Welsh poet Taliesin. In his poem, Taliesin claims the Lord said “transform stalwart trees into armies with him and obstruct Peblig the powerful from giving battle.”⁹³ This purpose is similar to Merry and Pippin’s goal with the Ents, who are transformed from tree-herders to a devastating army to prevent Saruman the powerful from giving battle elsewhere in Middle Earth. In the *Cad Goddeu*, this summoning is at the

⁹² Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 83.

⁹³ Ford, *The Mabinogi*, 184.

hands of Gwydion, a morally ambiguous character in Welsh mythology.⁹⁴ As a result, one can't be sure whether the tree-warriors themselves are on the side of good or evil. Comparably, Treebeard tells Marry and Pippin that "Some of us are still true Ents... but many are going tree-ish, as you might say... Most of the trees are just trees, of course... and a few are, well, getting Entish... When that happens to a tree, you find that some have *bad* hearts"⁹⁵. So, it would seem that Tolkien's tree-warriors are just as morally ambiguous as Taliesin's. While the Ents do fight on the side of good, clearly not all of them are good. In fact, some are decidedly bad, just like the Celtic tree-warriors in *Cad Goddeu*.

Furthermore, when Tolkien takes us to Entmoot, a gathering of the Ents, we see through hobbit eyes that "the Ents were as different from one another as trees from trees: some different as one tree is from another of the same name but quite different growth and history; and some as different as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir."⁹⁶ The different Ents are all given different personalities, different characters, representative of different trees. Taliesin does a similar thing with his tree warriors when he says

⁹⁴ Gwydion features in the 4th Branch of *The Mabinogi*. Nephew of Math, Gwydion is seen to contrive a war between Math and Pryderi (for little apparent reason), and he uses his magic for other seemingly amoral purposes.

⁹⁵ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 83.

⁹⁶ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 98.

Alder, pre-eminent in lineage, attacked in the beginning;
 Willow and rowan were late to the army;
 Thorny plum was greedy for slaughter;
 Powerful dogwood, resisting prince;
 Rose-trees went against a host in wrath...⁹⁷

He continues on for some time, listing various kinds of trees and ascribing to them different levels of authority, personality, or action just as Tolkien differentiates between his various Ents. The similarities are not a one-to-one correspondence between Ents and Taliesin's tree warriors, but they certainly give Tolkien's Ents a Celtic aura that permeates the forests under their care.

The Ents are, unfortunately, a disappearing race in *Lord of the Rings*. They are disappearing not because they are hunted or killed, not because they die of old age, but because there are no Entwives to mate with, no pairings of two genders to create offspring. This deficit is not, however, present in other races in Tolkien's world. In fact, where pairings occur elsewhere, the pairing itself often reverberates with a certain Celtic character, reminiscent of the Celtic divinity pairings of Fairy women and mortal men. A prime example of such a pairing in the Celtic tradition is the couple of Medb and Ailill. Medb is a euhemerized sovereignty and

⁹⁷ Ford, *The Mabinogi*, 184-5.

fertility goddess, while her husband, Ailill, is a mortal man. Often, in Celtic literature, a king marries a sovereignty goddess and if the marriage is successful the land itself becomes fertile and the kingdom prospers. True, this is a relatively universal concept, but it is *especially* important in Celtic myth, where “the idea of sovereignty personified as a divine female is an extremely persistent tradition in early Irish myth,”⁹⁸ and “central to the Irish sovereignty-myth was the sacred marriage, the ritual union of the goddess of the land, spirit of Ireland itself, with the mortal king.”⁹⁹ This concept manifests itself in Tolkien’s own coupling of Melian and Thingol. Tolkien tells of the meeting of Melian and Thingol in the *Silmarillion*, in which he reveals that “Melian was a Maia, of the race of the Valar,”¹⁰⁰ while Thingol was “lord of the Teleri,”¹⁰¹ a faction of Elves. In Tolkien’s world, the Maiar, lesser spirits of the Valar, can be thought of as the under-gods or retainers of the Valar in a sense.¹⁰² As the story goes, Melian is in her glade when Thingol stumbles upon her and they fall in love. Melian becomes his queen, he decides to stay in her garden, and the kingdom of Doriath prospers for nearly two ages, due in large part to the “girdle of Melian,” a magic protective shield she lays over the entire

⁹⁸ Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 70.

⁹⁹ Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 54.

¹⁰¹ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 54.

¹⁰² Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 21.

realm, allowing it to flourish.¹⁰³ By taking Melian as his queen, Thingol has married the sovereignty goddess of his land, and their prosperous marriage leads to a prosperous land, fitting perfectly in the Celtic tradition.

Galadriel and Celeborn, an Elven couple, also draw on the relationship of Medb and Ailill, though in a different way. Between Medb and Ailill, Medb is often the dominant one; it is Medb who instigates the war with Ulster in the *Táin*, and often Medb runs unchecked while Ailill is powerless. This power imbalance is consistent throughout Celtic mythology, which “assigns a conspicuous, even a dominant, role to the female divinities, for it is these, as avatars, or manifestations, of the earth-goddess, who are primarily associated with the land in all its various aspects: its fertility, its sovereignty...”¹⁰⁴ To a lesser extent, Galadriel is also the dominant party in her relationship with Celeborn, who plays a supporting role in the story, and appears to be no more than an adornment. In *Lord of the Rings*, he functions as the greeter for the royal couple but anything of worth is said by Galadriel. He is further marginalized by the knowledge that Galadriel was entrusted with Nenya, the (magic) Elven Ring of Waters, rather than Celeborn. It should be noted that Nenya is associated with fertility and healing, characteristics often associated with the goddess in a divinity pairing. This, like that of Medb and Ailill, is a

¹⁰³ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 140-1.

¹⁰⁴ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 49.

relationship explained by the female's primary worth in the legendarium as a whole. Galadriel is, among other things, a fertility goddess figure,¹⁰⁵ just as Medb is a euhemerized sovereignty goddess, while both Celeborn and Ailill are nothing more than "men".

Another divinity pairing with seemingly Celtic roots is that of Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, the Riverwoman's daughter. Both seem to be eternal characters, deities fulfilling the "appearance of a goddess as consort of a male deity"¹⁰⁶ common in Celtic tradition. Typically, these pairings can be reduced down to "the protecting god with the mother-goddess."¹⁰⁷ To see the divine Celtic quality of their pairing, it helps to first look at each character individually. Begin with Tom, whom Tolkien once described to a correspondent as the spirit of the vanishing countryside, a kind of *genius loci*, a spirit of place. Every adventure of his also leads to his being dragged under ground, literally into the earth, almost as if he belonged there, in the Celtic fairy mounds of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Now, look at Goldberry. Rivers (of which Goldberry is a daughter) are frequently associated with goddesses throughout the Celtic world and

¹⁰⁵ This idea of Galadriel as a mother-goddess is further explored in Chapter 6: Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit: Celtic Characters in Middle Earth.

¹⁰⁶ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 49.

“association with springs is also attested.”¹⁰⁸ Many of the goddesses associated with rivers were given powers of healing and fertility, powers Goldberry is also rumored to possess. These similarities help to evoke a general image of Goldberry as a Celtic mother-goddess, an image further supported by her matronly relationship with the hobbits. Also important to Goldberry is another common Celtic motif: a woman combing her hair by the river. A perfect example of this motif is seen in “The Wooing of Etain,” here translated by T.P. Cross and C.H. Slover:

There he saw a maiden on the brink of a spring. She held in her hand a comb of silver decorated with gold. Beside her, as for washing, was a basin of silver whereon were chased four golden birds, and there were little bright gems of carbuncle set in the rim of the basin. A cloak pure-purple, hanging in folds around her, and beneath it a mantle with silver borders, and a brooch of gold in the garment over her bosom. A tunic with a long hood about her, and as for it, smooth and glossy. It was made of greenish silk beneath red embroidery of gold, and marvelous bow-pins of silver and gold upon her breasts in the tunic, so that the redness of the gold against the sun in the green silk was clearly visible to

¹⁰⁸ Nora Chadwick, *The Celts: Second Edition*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 177.

the men. Two tresses of golden hair upon her head, and a
 plaiting of four strands in each tress, and a ball of gold
 upon the end of each plait. And the maiden was there
 loosening her hair to wash it...¹⁰⁹

For comparison, look at Tolkien's first description of Goldberry:

Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown
 was green, green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads
 of dew; and her belt was of gold, shaped like a chain of
 flag-lilies set with pale-blue eyes of forget-me-nots. About
 her feet in wide vessels of green and blue earthenware,
 white water-lilies were floating, so that she seemed to be
 enthroned in the midst of a pool.¹¹⁰

The Celtic women who comb their hair by the rivers are always
 supernatural in some way, a connection that helps enhance Goldberry's
 supernatural status. The other notorious Celtic hair-comber is the banshee,
 who is a close relative of the river goddess. It is interesting, then, that
 Goldberry is also a close relative of a river goddess, combing her hair by a
 river, evoking images of a Celtic mother-goddess, married to Tom

¹⁰⁹ T.P. Cross, ed. and H.C. Slover, ed., *Ancient Irish Tales*, (New York: Barnes and
 Nobles Books, 1996), 83.

¹¹⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 159.

Bombadil,¹¹¹ the spirit of the land and a protector – a goddess as a consort of a male deity.

A quick note on one final pairing must be mentioned here, as the pairing is the most well-known in the entire story: the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen. This marriage is literally between a fairy woman and a mortal man as Tolkien originally conceptualized his Elves as Fairies, naming them such in early versions of his work. We have a mortal man marrying an immortal woman, a tradition possibly Celtic (though it is not exclusive to Celtic tradition). But what their relationship really taps into, what gives it a saturated Celtic feel, is the idea of Sacral Kingship: the notion that when a rightful King sits on the throne, his land becomes prosperous. And this is where a quick note turns into a long story. As Proinsias Mac Cana states, “the sacral king is the spouse of his kingdom.”¹¹² This is often symbolized in the Celtic mythology by a sovereignty goddess of the land who is married to the king. Such a role explains the promiscuity of Medb “of the friendly thighs,” who has a litany of various kingly husbands, some of whom “could not be considered a king until he had slept with her.”¹¹³ Medb clearly represents exactly what Mac Cana is intimating – a king

¹¹¹ Tom will be discussed more in-depth in Chapter 6: Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit: Celtic Characters in Middle Earth.

¹¹² Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 120.

¹¹³ “Medb,” *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Web.

must marry a sovereignty goddess, one who is *of the land* in order to sanctify his kingship. Arwen, an immortal Elf, is the sole remaining member of the original race of Middle Earth, and her marriage to Aragorn can be seen as a union of King and Sovereignty goddess in much the same light.

Truthfully, this notion is not exclusively Celtic, and it occurs in *many* other cultures as well. However, the concept of sacral kingship was forceful and enduring in Celtic society, and

to the Irish mind kingship and the public weal were so intimately related as to be at times almost synonymous, and in the deep misery of the eighteenth century when poets lamented their country's servitude to a foreign oppressor and wishfully prophesied the return of the old order, it was always in terms of the restoration of the native kingship that they envisaged the great liberation.¹¹⁴

In light of its durability in the Irish Celtic tradition and its importance to Celtic mythology and literature, it is no stretch of the imagination to believe that Tolkien borrowed from the Celtic notion of kingship.

Accepting Celtic kingship as a source, scrutinizing various kingships of Middle Earth reveals a seemingly close connection. In the

¹¹⁴ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 117.

Celtic tradition, the qualities of a rightful king are reflected in the condition of his kingdom – a rightful, sacral king rules a prosperous, peaceful kingdom. This was the precedent set by the king Eochaidh mac Eirc: “No rain fell during his reign, but only the dew: there was no year without harvest. Falsehood was banished from Ireland during his time, and he it was who first established the rule of justice there.”¹¹⁵ Conversely, a king who is depraved, “who is blemished in his conduct and character or in his person will bring about corresponding privations.”¹¹⁶ There are four kings that reflect both sides of Celtic sacral Kingship in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*: two who personify the rightful King and two who do not. Aragorn, at the end of the story, marries Arwen and claims the throne of Gondor, and it is said of his reign that

In his time the City was made more fair than it had ever been, even in the days of its first glory; and it was filled with trees and with fountains, and its gates were wrought of mithril and steel, and its streets were paved with white marble and the Folk of the Mountain laboured in it, and the Folk of the Wood rejoiced to come there; and all was healed and made good, and the houses were filled with men and women and the laughter of children, and no window

¹¹⁵ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 58.

¹¹⁶ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 120.

was blind nor any courtyard empty... in the days that
 followed his crowning the King sat on his throne in the
 Hall of the Kings and pronounced his judgments.¹¹⁷

Here we see the prosperity, truth, justice and fertility that are promised a rightful king. In comparison, the previous ruler was Denethor, a steward of the kingship who was eventually corrupted and sought to call himself King. As he grew ever more corrupt, his kingdom suffered and hospitality waned. It is worth noting that in comparing Aragorn and Denethor, we only ever see Aragorn (the rightful King) with a wife. Presumably Denethor had one, as he has offspring, but she has passed on by the time we meet him, leaving him without that crucial marriage to sanctify his rule. Without that sanctity, Denethor's rule becomes characterized by dearth, while Aragorn's rule is defined by prosperity and plenty.

Sam, who is elected mayor *seven* times in his lifespan (occurring after the events of the books), also marries as he ascends to power, and plays the role of sacral King (or in this case, sacral Mayor). During Sam's tenure, the Shire prospered magnificently:

Altogether 1420 in the Shire was a marvelous year. Not
 only was there wonderful sunshine and delicious rain, in
 due times and perfect measure, but there seemed something

¹¹⁷ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 275.

more: an air of richness and growth, and a gleam of a beauty beyond that of mortal summers that flicker and pass upon this Middle-earth. All the children born or begotten in that year, and there were many, were fair to see and strong, and most of them had a rich golden hair. The fruit was so plentiful that young hobbits very nearly bathed in strawberries and cream; and later they sat on the lawns under the plum-trees and ate, until they had made piles of stones like small pyramids or heaped skulls of a conqueror, and then they moved on. And no one was ill, and everyone was pleased.¹¹⁸

Again, his reign can be contrasted with that of the previous ruler, Sharkey, a twisted and corrupt wizard formerly known as Saruman who descended upon the Shire and took to ruling it by force. During his reign, the Shire suffered as, among many other deprivations and evils, “they [the trees] had been cut down recklessly far and wide over the Shire.”¹¹⁹ Again, we see the contrast of dearth with a wrongful “King’s” rule (Sharkey) and prosperity with the sacral, rightful “King” (Sam). A final, fifth King who deserves mention with the wrongful Kings is the chief antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron, who tries to force his rule on Middle Earth. The

¹¹⁸ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 339.

¹¹⁹ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 337.

hallmark of his Kingdom, Mordor, is bareness, death, fire and destruction – hallmarks that, when he is overthrown, slowly disappear as his kingdom is subsumed in Aragorn’s rightful kingdom.

In addition to borrowing various structural elements from Celtic mythology to lend his setting a Celtic feel, Tolkien adapts the plotlines of a Celtic story or two as well. For example, there is a somewhat suggestive similarity between Tolkien’s story of Beren and Lúthien and the Welsh Celtic story of Culhwch and Olwen. Compare Culhwch’s first glimpse of Olwen, where “Four white clovers would spring up in her track wherever she went,”¹²⁰ with Beren’s first glimpse of Lúthien “and the song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed.”¹²¹ In both instances, flowers spring up where the beautiful maiden’s feet have tread, as if they were living embodiments of spring. But, the similarities don’t stop there. In both, the male heroes make rash promises after falling for beautiful, non-mortal maidens. Both heroes petition for help from exalted kings: Culhwch appeals to the famous Arthur, Beren to Finrod (an Elven king). Both men prove their identities with a ring and both are given seemingly impossible tasks to win the maiden, tasks that they complete, hunting and killing ferocious beasts (the wild boars, Twrch Trwyth and

¹²⁰ Ford, *The Mabinogi*, 135.

¹²¹ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 194.

Ysgithrywyn for Culhwch, and the wolf Carcharoth for Beren) with the help of an otherworldly hound (Cafall for Culhwch and Huan for Beren). While the details of each story differ, the main plot points vary very little, with both stories exhibiting similar structures with similar highs and lows.

Tolkien also borrows heavily from a very Irish Celtic genre of story, known as *Immram*, or Sea Voyage to the Otherworld. While this borrowing is not present in *The Lord of the Rings*, it serves as the main vehicle for the telling of a legend near and dear to Tolkien's heart and to Middle Earth, the Fall of Númenor.¹²² How important was this legend to Tolkien?

I say this about the 'heart', for I have what some might call an Atlantis complex. Possibly inherited, though my parents died too young for me to know such things about them, and too young to transfer such things by words. Inherited from me (I suppose) by one only of my children, [Tolkien's second son Michael] though I did not know that about my son until recently, and he did not know it about me. I mean

¹²² Númenor is a kingdom gifted to the tribe of Men who fought with the Elves at the end of the First Age when the rest of the race of Men betrayed them and fought for Melkor. Númenorians were blessed with all the arts the Elves themselves possessed, extended life, and proximity to the Valar on an Island paradise. After ages of peace, Sauron infiltrated the island and turned the hearts of many Númenorians against the Valar. When the King of Númenor succumbed to Sauron's counsel, a small group of Númenorians fled the island and returned to Middle Earth proper. This small group established the current kingdoms of Men and their lines are the lines of Kings (from which Aragorn is descended).

the terrible recurrent dream (beginning with memory) of
 the Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably
 over the trees and green fields. (I bequeathed it to Faramir.)
 I don't think I have had it since I wrote the 'Downfall of
 Númenor' as the last of the legends of the First and Second
 Age.¹²³

While this knowledge does not connect Númenor to Celtic mythology, it is interesting to note just how big a part of Tolkien's life this particular myth was. It would be very significant to be able to connect such an important myth to the Irish *Immram* tradition. *Immrama* have, as their subject matter, fantastic accounts of voyages to one or more Otherworlds. As the Reeses say, the idea of a voyage to the Otherworld is "one of the most distinctive in Celtic tradition."¹²⁴

Typically, the direction of the voyage is westward, and an important aspect of the Voyage to the Otherworld is that the journey involves a dislocation in time. What appears to be a day in the Otherworld may, in fact, be a century in the traveler's homeland. Or, potentially, years can pass while the traveler dwells in the Otherworld and, upon his return, he may find no time at all has passed. As Tolkien used the *Immram*

¹²³ Carpenter, *Letters*, 213.

¹²⁴ Rees & Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 314.

vehicle for a legend that is generally rather obscure to the casual reader, some background may first be necessary.

It begins with a tale called *The Lost Road*, an abortive time-travel story. The drive to write such a story can be credited to a seemingly spur-of-the-moment bargain Tolkien made with C.S. Lewis, which he explains in a 1967 letter to Charlotte and Denis Plimmer:

Lewis said to me one day: ‘Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.’ We agreed that he should try ‘space-travel,’ and I should try ‘time-travel.’ His result is well known. My effort, after a few promising chapters, ran dry: it was too long a way round what I really wanted to make, a new version of the Atlantis legend. The final scene survives as *The Downfall of Númenor*.¹²⁵

Tolkien’s time-travel effort did, as he noted, run dry after two chapters. Its main importance in his mythology was its ties to “The Downfall of Númenor,” an event that altered both the content and the frame of Middle Earth and its mythology.¹²⁶ The importance of this story in a discussion of

¹²⁵ Carpenter, *Letters*, 378.

¹²⁶ In the story itself, when the Númenorians invade Valinor, the Valar, in their wrath, drown every last one who invaded, strip Sauron of the ability to take any pleasing physical form and literally *bend* the world into a sphere, putting Valinor on a plane tangent to the now spherical world.

Celtic influences lies in Tolkien's concept of the vehicle for time travel. It was no fancy, flashy time machine, but a more subtle concept of temporal regressive incarnations of the same two identities, continually arising out of what seems to be a shared, collective memory. This idea of memory passed down through incarnations reverberates, interestingly enough, with multiple personages in Celtic mythology. Fintan, the sole survivor of the people who accompanied lady Cesair to Ireland, survived the biblical flood by turning into a fish: "He had been 15 years old at the coming of the waters, but survived for another 5,500 years. In surviving he had been transformed into a one-eyed salmon, an eagle, and a hawk before resuming his own shape."¹²⁷ When he resumes his human shape, he again appears as a young man, yet possesses the memories of a man from over 5 millennia prior. This motif is repeated yet again in the character of Tuan mac Cairill, of the Partholónian peoples. Like Fintan, he is the sole survivor of his people, and "lives through many generations under a series of metamorphoses as a stag, a boar, and an eagle. Finally he is changed into a salmon that is caught and eaten by the wife of Cairill, who gives birth to him again in human form so he may recite the early history of

¹²⁷ "Fintan mac Bóchra," *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Web.

Ireland.”¹²⁸ Like Fintan, Tuan is reborn many years in the future with the knowledge and memories of a man of ages past. Both stories use the *same device* Tolkien planned to use in order to transfer knowledge of a lost past to the “present” day.

However, the only pieces of the story that ever saw the page were the beginning (present time) and the aimed-for past of Númenor. Though the gap was never filled in, Christopher Tolkien cites what he describes as his father’s “rapid jotting down of ideas for the tales that should intervene.”¹²⁹ These included, among others, a Lombard Story, a tale of a Norse ship burial, and, most notably, a story of *mythic Ireland*. Of course, a story of mythic Ireland must be set in mythic Ireland, meaning Celtic Ireland, hence a Celtic story. This assertion is backed up by Tolkien’s specifying the story as a Tuatha Dé Danann story. But that is not the main Celtic thrust of *The Lost Road*.

Of more interest is what the tale became: a set of disorganized minutes of the meetings of a literary club known as *The Notion Club Papers*, mysteriously discovered in 2012 in the annals of Oxford. Tolkien described *The Notion Club Papers* to his publisher, Stanley Unwin, as “taking up in an entirely different frame and setting what little had any

¹²⁸ “Tuan mac Cairill,” *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Web.

¹²⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lost Road*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 85.

value in the inchoate *Lost Road*,”¹³⁰ and it is here that *The Lost Road* truly becomes an *Immram*. In his reconception of *The Lost Road* as *The Notion Club Papers*, Tolkien’s method of time travel becomes reincarnation or transmigration of memories, delivered through the *lucid dreaming* of one of the characters. In this way, the members of the Notion Club engage in an extended, multi-faceted voyage to another world – an Otherworld of the past and an earlier, distinctly other geographic state of Middle Earth (of which the characters are contemporary inhabitants). Here, a journey through memories is, of necessity, a journey to the past. And the distance between the past and the present necessitates that it is a journey to the other world of the dead, one of the (many) aspects of the Celtic Otherworld. Though they never made it, Tolkien intended for his time travelers to finally arrive at the major event of the Second Age, the Drowning of Númenor, which changes the shape of the world and removes Valinor, the land of the gods (also an otherworld), to another plane of existence. Additionally, the land of Númenor was the westernmost island before Valinor in its time. *The Notion Club Papers*, then, can be seen as a Voyage to the Otherworld, just as a Celtic *Immram* would be.

¹³⁰ Carpenter, *Letters*, 118.

In addition to these *Immram* connections, Tolkien includes a direct reference to the Celtic motif of an Otherworld Voyage when he has one of the members of *The Notion Club Papers* read aloud his own poetic version of an Irish *Immram*, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*. In the Notion Club, the poem appears as “The Death of St. Brendan,” but Tolkien also published the poem on its own with the title “Imram,” paying clear tribute to the genre from whence it came. In its original form in *The Notion Club Papers*, Tolkien makes it clear that “The Death of St. Brendan” is derived from the *Navigatio*. For those who are not familiar with the *Navigatio* itself, Tolkien carefully makes sure that, in the discussion that follows the reading, his characters single out exactly the elements of the poem that connect his myth to that of St. Brendan. Though the *Papers* never appeared in print during his lifetime, and though they begin in a world distinctly different from *The Lord of the Rings*, they are nevertheless meant to be a connecting gateway between our present time and Tolkien’s mythological past. It is of great consequence to the setting of his world that the vehicle through which Tolkien conceptualized the connection was, at its very roots, *Celtic*.

Continuing with St. Brendan and Tolkien’s use of the Irish *Immram* tradition, we turn our focus to Eärendil the Mariner, one of the first characters conceived in Tolkien’s mythology. In fact, according to his

biographer Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's poem called "The Voyage of Eärendil the Evening Star," written in 1914, constitutes "the beginnings of Tolkien's own mythology."¹³¹ In one *Immram* that we've already seen Tolkien use, the hero is St. Brendan, a religious figure who consequently could be considered "blessed." Curiously, Eärendil is known as Eärendil the Mariner or Eärendil the Blessed; both epithets suggest a connection to the Irish *Immram* tradition. Turning to another *Immram*, the *Voyage of Bran*, we see yet more similarities. While Bran sails past the Isles of Joy on his way to his final destination, Eärendil sails past the Enchanted Isles. Consistent with the *Immram* tradition, Eärendil the Mariner sails westward, seeking an otherworld paradise (Valinor) in an attempt to fulfill his destiny, a motivation he shows when he tells his companion "Await me here; for only one may bring the message that it is my fate to bear."¹³² And, consistent with the fate of Bran son of Febal, Eärendil is fated to never again set foot on the land of his homeland as a direct result of the time he has spent in the Otherworld.

¹³¹ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 79.

¹³² Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 298.

CHAPTER SIX: OF HERBS AND STEWED RABBIT

Celtic Characters in Middle Earth

To create a feeling of consistency in his Celtic tinged world, it would be logical for Tolkien to turn to Celtic mythology when he began to populate his world with characters. Sure enough, some of his characters appear distinctly Celtic in origin, not just pseudo-Celtic like those with Arthurian roots. Now we witness as Tolkien begins to draw on Celtic mythology in earnest, calling on the battle-goddess the Mórrígan, Lugh Long-Arm, Bres the Beautiful, Balar One-Eye and a host of distinctly Celtic personages to help shape his own characters.

One of the driving characters behind the story of *Lord of the Rings* is Tolkien's massive, ominous antagonist, Sauron of the Lidless Red Eye. When we see Sauron, we see one thing and one thing only:

In the black abyss there appeared a single Eye that slowly grew, until it filled nearly all the Mirror. So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or withdraw his gaze. The Eye was rimmed with fire, but was itself glazed,

yellow as a cat's, watchful and intent and the black slit of
its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing.¹³³

The main antagonist is essentially a baleful single eye whose power seems to include the ability to paralyze those it gazes upon (as when Pippin looks into the eye and becomes rigid and unable to move). While Sauron has massive armies gathering around him, the true weapon of destruction is himself. Similarly equipped is the main antagonist of *Cath Maige Tuired*, (the Second Battle of Mag Tuired), Balar 'of the baleful eye', the leader of the Fomorian army. His eye "was such that... when uncovered its venomous gaze could disable an army."¹³⁴

The threads linking these two characters are plentiful. Both antagonists are defined by their single eye, with its baleful stare powerful enough to disable armies and destroy all in its path. Both are the key weapons of their respective armies. And, Balar's defeat at the hands of Lugh "wrought destruction on his own followers."¹³⁵ Similarly, when Sauron is defeated by Frodo's destruction of the Ring, a scene of havoc ensues in his ranks as his power destroys his massive army:

The earth groaned and quaked. The Towers of the Teeth
swayed, tottered, and fell down; the mighty rampart

¹³³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 430.

¹³⁴ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 59.

¹³⁵ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 59.

crumbled; the Black Gate was hurled in ruin... their [the Captains of the West] enemies were flying and the power of Mordor was scattering like dust in the wind. As when death smites the swollen brooding thing that inhabits their crawling hill and holds them all in sway, ants will wander witless and purposeless and then feebly die, so the creatures of Sauron, orc or troll or beast spell-enslaved, ran hither and thither mindless...¹³⁶

Interestingly, both antagonists are destroyed by a small object hurled into their eyes. Balar dies when Lugh casts a sling-stone directly into his eye, while Sauron's demise comes when the Ring is cast into the pit of Mount Doom, the metaphorical eye of his power.

While their stories are already quite similar, the parallels between Sauron and Balar don't end there. More connections exist farther back in Tolkien's mythological history, when Sauron fell the *first* time, an event that precedes *Lord of the Rings* by nearly 3,000 years. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien recounts the War of the Last Alliance, a battle in which Elves and Men united to overthrow the tyranny of Sauron. Present at the battle is Gil-galad, King of the Elves, with his spear Aeglos. It is said that "against

¹³⁶ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 252.

Aeglos the spear of Gil-galad none could stand.”¹³⁷ Lugh, given Kingship of the Tuatha Dé Danann (who I will later argue are a model for Tolkien’s Elves)¹³⁸, also possessed a famed magic spear, the Spear Luin. Furthermore, there is a striking resemblance between Tolkien’s description of Gil-galad (and the origin of his name):

It is recorded that Ereinion was given the name Gil-galad “Star of Radiance” because his helm and mail, and his shield overlaid with silver and set with a device of white stars, shone from afar like a star in sunlight or moonlight, and could be seen by Elvish eyes at a great distance if they stood upon a height.¹³⁹

and T.W. Rolleston’s description of Lugh in *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*:

So equipped, he appeared one day before an assembly of the Danaan chiefs who were met to pay their tribute to the envoys of the Formorian oppressors; and when the Danaans saw him, they felt, it is said, as if they beheld the rising of the sun on a dry summer’s day.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 352.

¹³⁸ See Chapter 7: The Old Forest: Elves and the Tuatha Dé Danann.

¹³⁹ Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 227.

¹⁴⁰ T.W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, (London: George G. Harrap & Company, 1929), 113.

Both heroes are arrayed in such a way that their adornments are reminiscent of viewing pure, unadulterated sunlight. Both heroes also lead their peoples against the oppression of a monstrous enemy, Sauron in Gil-galad's case and Balar in Lugh's. Their paths depart, however, when they meet the baleful eye – Gil-galad dies at Sauron's hands while Lugh survives to kill Balar. It would appear then, that Gil-galad's Celtic roots don't extend beyond his accoutrements, name and title. However, if we consider Nuada, another Tuatha king who *is* slain by Balar's eye in the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, we see suggestions that Gil-galad's fate is simply tied to Nuada instead of Lugh.

A further similarity between the story of the Second Battle of Mag Tuired and Tolkien's own mythology may connect Bres the Beautiful and Morgoth (also known as Melkor). The connection here is a shaky one, and is offered more as a suggestion that, while it could be true, does not necessarily need to be true to further my assertion of the presence of Celtic undercurrents in Tolkien's mythology. The similarity lies mainly in the way the two characters are treated. Bres, a Fomorian and, hence, a one-time enemy, is given rulership of the Tuatha "on condition that he would

surrender the sovereignty if his misdeeds should give cause.”¹⁴¹ After this, he proceeds to strip the Tuatha of their riches and food, essentially enslaving them to the Fomoiré. It is his misdeeds that lead to the Second Battle of Mag Tuired. After the battle, Bres is captured and pleads for his life, which is finally spared when he gives advice on the proper times for plowing, sowing and reaping. Similarly, Morgoth is allowed to descend to Middle Earth with the rest of the Valar when he promises Ilúvatar that his intention is to help calm the unrest he created. Of course, upon his arrival, he proceeds to wreak havoc until he eventually incurs the wrath of the Valar, who imprison him. After a long imprisonment, Morgoth’s life is finally given back to him when he teaches the Valar and the Elves of Valinor many crafts of jewel-making. So, in a sense, their stories follow very basic parallel paths. Again, while parallel, it is entirely probable that these stories are only parallel by coincidence, as there is little specific evidence to link the two.

We now proceed to the most confusing character in all of Tolkien’s mythology: Tom Bombadil. Unraveling what may have gone into the character of Tom Bombadil is like trying to unravel a ball of yarn with a cat’s claws still stuck in it. Tolkien himself said of Bombadil that “even in a mythical age there must be some enigmas, as there always are.

¹⁴¹ Rees & Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 33.

Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally).”¹⁴² Piecing together Tom’s existence appears to be quite a hopeless task, then, if Tom’s existence is *meant* to be a mystery. Nevertheless, there is an interesting Celtic flavor to Tom’s character that merits discussion. As was previously noted, his spouse, Goldberry, seems to show heavy Celtic influence as a localized river-deity. With a Celtic spouse, it would be negligent *not* to look at Tom with the idea that he, too, may have some Celtic influences at play. Enigmatic though he may be, the thought is encouraging. After all, Tolkien himself said that Tom represented “the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside,”¹⁴³ making him a sort of nature spirit tied to a specific place, a phenomenon that occurs with some frequency in the Celtic tradition. While this is not a solely Celtic occurrence, Tom’s roots go much deeper than that.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Elrond refers to him as “Iarwain Ben-adar,” which in Elvish means “old” and “fatherless,” fitting as Tom claims himself to be “eldest.” However, since the Elvish language is based on Welsh, it makes sense to look at the name as Welsh as well. In such a case, it could be etymologized as “henseed head-of-birds”: *iar* means

¹⁴² Carpenter, *Letters*, 174.

¹⁴³ Carpenter, *Letters*, 26.

“hen”; *gwain* means “seed or nut”; *adar*¹⁴⁴ is the plural of *aderyn*, “bird”; and *pen* means “head.” Alternately, the *-wain* may be comparable to the second element in the Welsh name Owain, which may be derived from the Celtic *Esugenus* (“born of the god Esus”), in which case Tom’s first name would be something like “chicken-child.”¹⁴⁵ So, then, we have arrived at a version of Tom’s name that means either “chicken-child” or “henseed head-of-birds.” While this sort of naming is typical (and unsurprising) among the Middle Welsh narratives Tolkien studied as an undergraduate, it is not insignificant. In fact, being able to etymologize Tom’s name to this particular translation is potentially *very* significant. The Welsh etymology of his name connects him to an important Welsh-Celtic figure: the poet Taliesin.

The story of Taliesin’s birth is a tricky one: before he was Taliesin, he was a little boy named Gwion Bach. Gwion was hired by the witch Ceridwen to watch a cauldron that, after a year of boiling, produced a drop of wisdom. Now, Ceridwen intended to bestow that drop on her hideous son to compensate for his looks. Unfortunately, Gwion accidentally consumed the drop, obtaining for himself that wisdom. Knowing that Ceridwen would try to kill him, Gwion fled. After a lengthy chase full of

¹⁴⁴ In his lecture “English and Welsh” the word *adar* is the first on a long list of what Tolkien considers “pleasurable” Welsh words.

¹⁴⁵ The etymology of Iarwain Ben-adar as Welsh can be attributed to Leslie Ellen Jones in *Myth and Middle-earth*.

shape-shifting, in an attempt to hide, Gwion runs into a barn and changes himself into a grain. Ceridwen, knowing what he's done, changes into a chicken and eats the grain. At this point, she carries him inside her for nine months and then gives birth to him. He is, however, so beautiful that she cannot bear to kill him or see him come to harm, so she seals him in a watertight skin bag and throws him in the sea. When he is pulled out by a spendthrift son of a Welsh noble, Elphin, he comes out of the skin bag singing consolation to Elphin (despite being only three days old).

From this story, then, Taliesin is both chicken-feed and chicken born, evoking similarities to the etymology of Tom's name. He is also a singer, and as is seen later in the story, he has a seemingly magical command of language such that the words he speaks actually have power over reality itself. Hence, it is possible for him "to have sung a song at that moment that resulted in the opening of the fetters from around his [Elphin's] feet."¹⁴⁶ Remarkably, Tom has the same power over language, as evidenced when Frodo and Sam appeal to him for help with Old Man Willow and he responds by saying "That can soon be mended. I know the tune for him. Old grey Willow-man! I'll freeze his marrow cold, if he don't behave himself. I'll sing his roots off. I'll sing a wind up and blow

¹⁴⁶ Ford, *The Mabinogoi*, 174.

leaf and branch away. Old Man Willow!’’¹⁴⁷ Sure enough, Tom trots off and, through song, releases the imprisoned Merry and Pippin from the grips of Old Man Willow. A similar scene of song releasing bonds, of song and language literally having power over reality, connects both Tom and Taliesin beyond the already remarkable similarities of chicken-feed and chicken-born.

A final point of similarity between Tom and Taliesin can be seen in Tom’s boast that “Tom was here before the river and the trees... when the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless – before the Dark Lord came from Outside’’¹⁴⁸ when it is compared with Taliesin’s insistence that

I was with my lord
 in the heavens
 When Lucifer fell
 into the depths of hell;
 I carried a banner
 before Alexander;
 I know the stars’ names

¹⁴⁷ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 156.

¹⁴⁸ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 168.

From the North to the South...¹⁴⁹

Both boasts revolve around a claim to eternal knowledge – both characters insist they are as old (or older) than existence itself. Both refer to stars and fallen lords (Lucifer or The Dark Lord). Both boasts can be seen as a final strand connecting these two chicken-born heroes.

Tom, however, is too much of an enigma to be explained by a connection to a single character. After all, Taliesin is eternally single while Tom appears eternally married. Taliesin is a poet, who must have a patron, while Tom is patron unto himself. In short, while Tom likely owes Taliesin, there is much about him that can be attributed elsewhere (including a doll one of Tolkien's sons flushed down the toilet). With that in mind, another potential Celtic connection for Tom Bombadil is Angus Óg, a member of the Irish Tuatha Dé Danann a short jump across the pond from Taliesin. Angus is the god of youth and beauty among the Tuatha, two qualities Tom, despite his age, embodies in his frantic merry-making. Angus's usual residence was Brug na Bóinne (Newgrange), where "trees were always in fruit and a cooked pig was always ready for the eating."¹⁵⁰ Similarly, in *Lord of the Rings*, Tom's house is a site of constant feasting where food stores are never depleted: "It was a long and merry meal.

¹⁴⁹ Ford, *The Mabinogi*, 172.

¹⁵⁰ "Angus Óg," *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Web.

Though the hobbits ate, as only famished hobbits can eat, there was no lack.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, Angus is always associated with birds throughout Celtic mythology, a motif that picks up on Tom’s own bird-themed name.

Like Tom, Angus also has ties to the river, though in Angus’s case, it is his mother who is the river, making him the son of a river, so perhaps this motif is picked up in Goldberry rather than Tom himself. However, both characters (Tom and Angus) are known to sing. In “Aislinge Óenguso,” translated as “The Vision of Angus,” Angus is seen chanting such wondrous songs that those who heard them were unable to sleep for three days, while Tom’s ability to control that which is around him with song has already been documented. Interestingly, Tom’s song also has a certain power over sleep as, when he sings Merry and Pippin out of Old Man Willow, he does so by commanding Old Man Willow to go back to sleep: “What you be a-thinking of? You should not be waking. Eat earth! Dig deep! Drink water! Go to sleep! Bombadil is talking!”¹⁵²

Another character who, like Tom, can (likely) trace her lineage to Celtic mythology is Galadriel. In exploring Celtic influence on Galadriel, it is prudent to make a stop in the pseudo Celtic realm of Arthurian literature before we go spelunking, as she has an Arthurian parallel in Morgan le Fay. Ignoring Morgan’s less pleasing traits for the moment,

¹⁵¹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 161.

¹⁵² Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 156.

Morgan's beauty, power, and ability to escape from the effects of time are present in Galadriel. The fairy queen (Morgan) also possessed the power to seduce men, a power that is suggested in Galadriel, best depicted when she welcomes the Fellowship to Lothlórien and addresses Gimli,

“Dark is the water of Kheled-zâram, and cold are the springs of Kibil-nâla, and fair were the many-pillared halls of Khazad-dûm in Elder Days before the fall of mighty kings beneath the stone.” She looked upon Gimli, who sat glowering and sad, and she smiled. And the Dwarf, hearing the names given in his own ancient tongue, looked up and met her eyes; and it seemed to him that he looked suddenly into the heart of an enemy and saw there love and understanding. Wonder came into his face, and then he smiled in answer. He rose clumsily and bowed in dwarf-fashion, saying: “Yet more fair is the living land of Lórien, and the lady Galadriel is above all the jewels that lie beneath the earth!”¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 421.

In this scene, Galadriel manages to entrance Gimli, a dwarf with naught more than some words and a smile.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Tolkien originally planned to call his Elves fairies.¹⁵⁵ This is evident in the poem titled *Kortirion among the Trees* that Tolkien wrote in 1915. The story of the poem appears later in his mythology, but where he says “fairy” in the poem, he uses “elf” in later versions of the story. However, at one point, Tolkien conceived of his Elves as fairies, and Galadriel is a Queen. With the knowledge that elf and fairy were interchangeable in Tolkien’s mind, Galadriel’s title becomes the Fairy Queen, identical to the title of Morgan. Both, additionally, lived in an isolated magical realm. Morgan is not, however, a purely Celtic character. She is the product of a transmutation of Celtic mythology as it was passed between generations and cultures, following the path of the Arthurian legend. Conveniently enough, Galadriel and Morgan both share the same, basic, Celtic root: the Mórrígan, an old Celtic goddess.

The Mórrígan is a proud, jealous and vengeful goddess who is a “goddess of battle, strife and fertility.”¹⁵⁶ She can appear either alluring or extremely hideous, and turns from benefactor to adversary in the blink of

¹⁵⁴ What makes this enchantment all the more remarkable is the intense levels of distrust and hatred that is inherent between the races of Dwarfs and Elves – since the beginning it has been fated that they shall often be at odds with and distrust each other.

¹⁵⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales I*, ed. Christopher R. Tolkien, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 16-17.

¹⁵⁶ “Morrigan,” *Encyclopedia Mythica*, 2010, Encyclopedia Mythica Online.

an eye. At first, this connection seems odd. How can Galadriel, the most revered of Tolkien's Elves in Middle Earth, be linked to the Mórrígan, sometimes referred to as the Nightmare Queen?¹⁵⁷ Even the Galadriel we see in *Lord of the Rings*, the tamest appearance of her character, has her connections to the Mórrígan. She is feared by those who are unfamiliar with her and is considered perilous by those who have not met her. Yet, for those who know her, there is a deep-seeded feeling of trust and loyalty. On the whole, Galadriel is a very ambiguous character to the denizens of Middle Earth, and those who are loyal to her are often met with suspicion, their intentions disbelieved as it is said that "if you have her favour, then you also are net-weavers and sorcerers,"¹⁵⁸ implying that they, as extensions of Galadriel, are spreaders of deceit and hence, chaos. Interestingly, it can also be said of the Mórrígan that "her role was ambiguous: she was a guardian against chaos... But she was also a cause of chaos."¹⁵⁹ Galadriel occupies a similarly perceived role in Middle Earth. Additionally, the Mórrígan as war-goddess "did not physically join in combat; her method was psychological."¹⁶⁰ The use of psychological warfare by the Mórrígan becomes a very interesting and important distinction when one considers how Galadriel faces off with her demonic

¹⁵⁷ J.A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, (London: Constable, 1991), 72.

¹⁵⁸ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 45.

¹⁶⁰ Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 42.

counterpart, Shelob. When we see Shelob in *Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel is geographically far away, removing her from physically joining the combat. However, she had given Frodo a light, a light whose power is used to psychologically defeat Shelob. Here, then, we have yet another parallel with the Mórrígan – psychological warfare.

For the most part, however, any more demonic side she may have is only rumored to exist in *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien does briefly bring it to the surface though. When Frodo offers Galadriel the Ring, she responds with this monologue:

In place of a Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I
shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning
and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow
upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the
Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All
shall love me and despair!¹⁶¹

Tantalized with the promise of unbridled power, Galadriel momentarily loses control of herself, her concealed ambition driving her feelings. This is not a unique occurrence, and though she quickly regains control of herself, these few lines are enough to unveil the demonic side hidden within Galadriel that hungers for strife, her inner Mórrígan. Further

¹⁶¹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 431-2.

suggestions of connections between Galadriel (in *Lord of the Rings*) and the Mórrígan can be found. At the end of the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, it is said of the Mórrígan that “After the battle she celebrated the victory as a bard or poet, but she also prophesied the end of the world.”¹⁶² Similarly, Galadriel herself celebrates Frodo’s impending victory and destruction of the Ring while simultaneously prophesying the end of the Elven world as the Elves are destined to disappear with Frodo’s success.

Galadriel only makes a cameo appearance in *Lord of the Rings*. To completely unveil her character, one must delve into other bodies of Tolkien’s mythology, where she appears in a more raw form. In the *Silmarillion*, we learn that she was the only woman among the Noldor¹⁶³ who rebelled against the Valar and left the land of Valinor for Middle Earth because she “yearned to see the wide, unguarded lands and rule there a realm at her own will.”¹⁶⁴ The tame, calm, composed and selfless Galadriel of *Lord of the Rings* is subsumed by her driving ambition and a prideful streak willing to defy a higher power, letting her pride run amuck and causing strife. And in the *Unfinished Tales*, she is drawn closer to the Mórrígan. Her mother-name is Nerwen, which means man-maiden, and Tolkien says she is “a match for both the loremasters and the athletes of

¹⁶² Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 44.

¹⁶³ In Tolkien’s mythology the Elves in Valinor were split into three tribes or races. The Noldor are one of these races.

¹⁶⁴ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 90.

the Eldar,”¹⁶⁵ implying that, though she is a woman, she is as strong or stronger than any of the Elves, making her an especially imposing figure. She revolts with Fëanor (the leader of the Noldor) in his attempt to leave Valinor, exposing her as an active, ambitious and nearly masculine figure whose desire to reign over a kingdom herself adds to the disruption Fëanor causes. Later, when he sheds the blood of her mother’s kin, Galadriel becomes vengeful and yearns to “follow Fëanor with her anger... and to thwart him in all ways that she could.”¹⁶⁶ This fickle behavior is very similar to the behavior of the Mórrígan in the *Táin*: when Cúchulainn spurns her advances at the ford, she attacks him three times during three battles in an attempt to thwart him. Galadriel is so stubborn in her pride that, in *Unfinished Tales*, she refuses the pardon of the Valar (who pardoned all that revolted against them) at the end of the first age and stays in Middle Earth instead of returning to Valinor with most of her kin.¹⁶⁷ In sum, we see a Galadriel considerably closer to the strife-promoting, vengeful Mórrígan than her brief appearances in *Lord of the Rings* lead us to believe.

Furthermore, there is more to the Mórrígan than the evil side she is credited with. Before he spurned her sexual advances, she actually

¹⁶⁵ Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 241.

¹⁶⁶ Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 242.

¹⁶⁷ Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 243.

attempted to help Cúchulainn, and again she is present at his death-scene attempting to save him. There is not enough to wash away her poor reputation, but there are other indications she was once a more positive figure. For example – “that the Mórrígan was not only a goddess of war and death but also of fertility was indicated by her recurring association with cattle.”¹⁶⁸ She has the ability to see into the future, using it to warn the great Donn of Cuailnge of imminent danger, and she mates with the Dagda (the Good God); and it is hard to fathom any union with the Dagda that is not favorable and positive. In her mating with the Dagda, her many other sexual exploits, and the various place names that bear her mark, we see further proofs that she was once a fertility goddess. Additionally, the volume of connections between her and water suggests she may be descendent of an ancient Celtic divinity of the waters (an element often associated with fertility). Compare this to the more well-known side of Galadriel: she wears the ring *Nenya*,¹⁶⁹ which is the Elven Ring of Waters and inhabits a water-bound land. She herself can see far into the future and has mastery over water (as the Mórrígan has mastery over effects of nature). In a sense Galadriel is also a fertility figure. When Sam plants the box of soil she gives him, it sends out unchecked fertility throughout the Shire in both vegetation and the birth of young hobbits. And her ability to

¹⁶⁸ Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 45.

¹⁶⁹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 431.

enthrall men (as mentioned previously) provides a further tie to Mórrígan as seductress.

Though their stories seem inextricably entwined, it could to be argued that Galadriel is firmly entrenched on the side of good, while the Mórrígan is not. However, Tolkien connects Galadriel with Shelob, who is far from a saint, allowing him to expose a more demonic and less righteous character. Though the two (Galadriel and Shelob) are separated by distance, they are bonded through a balance of opposition. Galadriel sustains life; Shelob takes it. Galadriel chooses to dwindle in power so others may shine; Shelob wants only to consume the power of others. Galadriel is nearly entirely removed from the physical realm and one can hardly envision her having children, while Shelob revels in body and breeds “bastards of the miserable mates that she slew.”¹⁷⁰ Galadriel gives light, light that defeats Shelob, who is all darkness. But more than just opposition connects the characters. Both have histories that are eons long and stretch back to the first age of Middle Earth; both are referred to as ‘lady’ or ‘her ladyship.’ Shelob is the embodiment of the entrapping female, “weaving webs of shadow,”¹⁷¹ fulfilling the negative rumors of

¹⁷⁰ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 393.

¹⁷¹ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 393.

Galadriel, a weaver of webs herself: “Then there is a Lady in the Golden Wood... Few escape her nets, they say.”¹⁷²

With this duality in mind, one can see Shelob as the negative, monstrous piece of Galadriel that is not present in her character proper. Just as the Mórrígan was linked in a triad of goddesses, Galadriel may only be representative of one half of a dual goddess composed of herself and Shelob. And Shelob too, has her connections to the Mórrígan. In *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, a compilation of Irish lore dating back as early as 1160 (though the stories are ages older) translated and published by Edward Gwynn, there is a poem lamenting the death of Odras.¹⁷³ Interestingly, her death scene is suspiciously reminiscent of a scene in Tolkien between the prostrate Frodo and Shelob. In Odras’s death, the “horrid Mórrígan, the envious queen, the shape-shifting goddess, emerges from the Cave of Cruachan, her fit abode... with fierceness unabating chants every spell of power”¹⁷⁴ over the sleeping Odras. Strongly resonant are the images of Shelob venturing out of her ‘black hole’ with murderous intent and bending over the prostrate Frodo to fill him with her venom, her version of the Mórrígan’s spells of power. This connection of Shelob to the Mórrígan is strengthened by Shelob’s thirst for destruction, a thirst

¹⁷² Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 41.

¹⁷³ Edward Gwynn (ed.), *The Metrical Dindshenchas, Part IV*, (Dublin: W and G Baird, 1991), 196-201.

¹⁷⁴ Gwynn *The Metrical Dindshenchas, Part IV* 196-201.

common in the Mórrígan's own dark, destructive side. One may conclude then, that both the Mórrígan and Galadriel are composite deities with multiple personalities exhibited multiple ways, and many of their personality traits do, in fact, match up, making it probable that the one (Galadriel) owes much of her character to the other (the Mórrígan).

CHAPTER SEVEN:

THE OLD FOREST

Tolkien's Elves and the Tuatha Dé Danann

Thus far, we have looked at many individual occurrences, characters, or minor races in Middle Earth and found potential Celtic antecedents. It is now time to take the argument one step further, to turn a critical Celtic eye on one of Tolkien's *major* races – the Elves. We have already seen that Galadriel, chief amongst the Elves, draws on Celtic mythology, both in her character and her relationship with her husband. We have looked at Arwen as a sovereignty goddess, Gil-galad in connection with Lugh and Nuada of the Tuatha. We mentioned that the Elvish language is based on Welsh, and we have connected the story of Beren and Lúthein to Welsh Celtic mythology. Notice that all of these connections have something in common besides a Celtic quality: they're all *Elvish*. If there are so many individual occurrences of Tolkien's adapting Celtic mythology for Middle Earth specifically regarding Elves, is this indicative of a more systematic adaptation? The answer is an

emphatic *yes*, as a close look at Tolkien's Elves reveals striking similarities to the Irish Tuatha Dé Danann as a people.

Before we look at the story of the Tuatha Dé Danann, it is worthwhile to see how Tolkien used the book in which they appear, the pseudo-historical *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, or the Book of Invasions. The book recounts seven invasions (depending on how one counts) of Ireland by various peoples, some historical, some mythological and some biblical. In Tolkien's *Book of Lost Tales*, the land of England is equated to Luthany, which is portrayed as having undergone multiple invasions, a mythological story referred to as the "Seven Invasions of Luthany." Each invasion corresponds to a different group of either Men or Elves, some of whom are left unnamed. Of the named, there are the "Brithonin," the "Rumhoth," the "Ingwaiwar," and the "Forodwaith," though they did not necessarily invade in this order (The Ingwaiwar were the seventh invasion).¹⁷⁵ Of these, the last three can be safely identified as the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings respectively, corresponding to three of the historical peoples who did, in fact, invade England. Furthermore, if one takes a cursory glance at the title "Brithonin", one will notice striking similarity to the Celtic word that's come to represent the British:

¹⁷⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales 2*, ed. Christopher R. Tolkien (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 310.

Brythonic.¹⁷⁶ With this in mind, it is likely that “Brithonin” refers to the British-Celts who invaded England prior to the Romans and Anglo-Saxons. As one can see, Tolkien’s sketched narrative for his overarching history corresponds very loosely to accepted history (with some fantastical peoples mixed in), just as *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* does. For Tolkien, the Ingwaiwar (the last invasion) are considered to be the ancestors of the English, for the *Lebor Gabála*, the Sons of Mil are considered the ancestors of the Irish. So, by using the general framework of the *Lebor Gabála*, Tolkien begins to construct a pseudo-history of England in the very same manner that the *Lebor Gabála* attempts to construct a pseudo-history of Ireland.

With such a comparison, it is worth noting that, until relatively recently, scholars tended to attribute some historicity to the *Lebor Gabála* and made attempts to identify the mythological invasions in the book with possible real, historical invasions, as we see when Seamus MacManus says “the Firbolg was the first. Legend says they came from Greece... in their possession of Ireland the Firbolgs were disturbed by the descents and depredations of African sea-rovers, the Fomorians, who had a main

¹⁷⁶ “Brythonic,” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Ed. T. F. Hoad, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Web.

stronghold on Tory Island, off the Northwest Coast.”¹⁷⁷ MacManus, writing as late as 1921, clearly considers the entire account of the *Lebor Gabála* to be historical fact.

Within the *Lebor Gabála* is the story of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the penultimate invaders of Ireland and the final group before the Sons of Mil, the supposed historical ancestors of the Irish themselves. The Tuatha trace their lineage to a previous group of invaders led by Nemed, whose group was replaced by another race known as the Fir Bolg.¹⁷⁸ In fact, the Tuatha are only one of three groups descendent from Nemed:

He had four sons – Starn, Jarbonnel, Fergus and Aininn.

Some two hundred and sixteen years after coming to

Ireland, the Nemedians were overthrown... and only thirty

escaped under the leadership of the three cousins,

grandsons of Nemed, Simeon Breac, son of Starn;

Beothach, son of Jarbonnel; and Britan Mael, son of

Fergus.¹⁷⁹

Of these cousins, the Tuatha draw their lineage from Beothach. The Tuatha invade from a group of northern islands (alternately: Greece)

¹⁷⁷ Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race*, (Old Greenwich: The Devin-Adair Company, 1992), 2.

¹⁷⁸ R.A. Stewart MacAlister, (trans.), *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland, Part IV* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1941), 107.

¹⁷⁹ Alexander MacBain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, (Hertfordshire: Oracle Publishing Ltd., 1996), 107.

where they were “learning druidry and knowledge and prophecy and magic.”¹⁸⁰ They came to Ireland (while fleeing from the Philistines, according to one account) led by their king, Nuada, and demanded the kingship from the Fir Bolg through battle. One version of the story adds that they were justified in invading Ireland because it was theirs by right of heredity. But, before we get to the details there, let us turn our eye to the story of the Noldor, the Elves who fled Valinor.

In Tolkien’s mythology, the Elves simply grew into being, emerging out of the very ground itself. They emerge in Middle Earth itself, under the stars, where they reside for a time. Their lives are perilous, as Middle Earth is under the yoke of Melkor, the arch-nemesis of the Valar, who are unaware the Elves have awoken. When the Valar learn of the arrival of the Elves, they attempt to escort them from Middle Earth to Valinor where they will be safe. While most of the Elves (led by *three* cousins) make it to Valinor, there are some that get lost during the journey. Many of them fall into the clutches of Melkor, who twists their spirits, corrupting them and creating a race known as Orcs. The Elves who do make it to Valinor are taught all kinds of crafts and skills, given knowledge of various arts, magic among them. As with the Tuatha, the Elves can trace their lineage back to a group who did, at one point, inhabit

¹⁸⁰ MacAlister, *The Lebor Gabála*, 107.

Middle Earth, and they will come back to Middle Earth from far away northern islands in a bid to “return to our home,”¹⁸¹ theirs by right of heredity.

Let us return to the story of the Tuatha, whom we left primed to invade Ireland and, in some versions, return to their rightful home. In their story, they

set out on the sea... they took harbor on the coast of Ireland; a Monday on the first of May. They burned their boats and ships, in order that the Fomorians should not be able to use them against them and further, in order that they themselves should not have them to flee therein from Ireland, if it was against them the Fir Bolg should be victorious... Then they made a great darkness around them... Then they demanded battle or kingship from their kinsmen the Fir Bolg.¹⁸²

In short, we have a group of semi-divine peoples who are represented as “large, strong, beautiful beings who mingled with mortals and yet remained superior to them,”¹⁸³ with great knowledge and craft returning to what is perceived as their home by right. Upon arrival they burn their

¹⁸¹ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 89.

¹⁸² From “The Book of Invasions” in Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 12-3.

¹⁸³ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 1.

ships so that they cannot be used by anyone that follows them and so they themselves cannot retreat. They then advance under cover of darkness to fight with their kinsmen (in the dark) for kingship of Ireland.

Now, compare this to the tale of the Noldor's arrival in Middle Earth, known as "The Flight of the Noldor," which appears in multiple (inconsistent) sources. The Noldor were the most skilled group of Elves in Valinor, having learned much craft and knowledge, and in their glory they created three Silmarils – gems that burned with the flame of creation. So powerful were these gems that only three such gems ever have and ever will be created in all of Middle Earth. They are coveted by all, until Morgoth steals them from the Noldor. Enraged by the theft, under the leadership of Fëanor (who crafted the gems himself) the Noldor abandon Valinor to return to Middle Earth and battle Morgoth and his Orcs. In order to do so, they slaughter the Teleri¹⁸⁴ for their ships, a horrible crime that goes down in history as the *kin-slaying*, and flee Valinor in the Teleri ships, sailing overseas to Middle Earth. At this point it is interesting to note the importance of *kin-slaying* in this story, particularly because kin-slaying is such an important (and taboo) feature of many Irish Celtic legends. So important is it, in fact, that there is actually an Irish Celtic word, *Fingal*, that is defined as "wounding or slaying of a relative;

¹⁸⁴ The Teleri are one of three groups of Elves present in Valinor. They happen to be seafaring Elves, and are the only ones with ships.

murder, treason.”¹⁸⁵ There is no direct connection between specific Irish stories and this one, but the importance is worth noting all the same.

Resuming the story of the Noldor, who, having lost some ships to rough weather, land and split into two groups (one led by Fëanor, the other led by Fingolfin). Fëanor’s group agrees to sail to Middle Earth and then send the ships back for Fingolfin and his followers. Upon arrival, however, Fëanor is asked whom he will spare to send the ships back, to which he responds “None and none! What I have left behind I count now no loss, needless baggage on the road it has proved. Let those that cursed my name, curse me still, and whine their way back to the cages of the Valar! Let the ships burn!”¹⁸⁶ As with the Tuatha, we see the Noldor burning their ships to prevent anyone from following them after having fled a northern island where they learned much lore, returning to what they perceive as their rightful home to do battle with the current inhabitants, their now monstrous one-time kin.

We return to the story of the Tuatha one final time to witness them give battle to the Fir Bolg, their kin (in some sources), in the First Battle of Mag Tuired. The battle was fought in the dark, as the Tuatha “brought a

¹⁸⁵ “Fingal,” *Dictionary of the Irish Language: based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*, (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913), 307.

¹⁸⁶ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 98.

darkness over the sun for a space of three days and three nights.”¹⁸⁷ In the battle, Nuada, the leader of the Tuatha Dé Danann, loses his arm and the kingship with it, as he is no longer physically flawless. Though they emerge victorious with Ireland as their spoils, the Tuatha incur heavy losses. Similarly, the Noldor fight a battle against their own distant kin: the Battle-Under-Stars. Fëanor is killed at the outset of the battle, leaving Maedhros, his eldest son, as leader of the Noldor. The battle is fought in the dim starlight as the Sun and the Moon have yet to be created. In the battle, Maedhros is captured and hung up by his right-wrist on a cliff. Maedhros is eventually rescued by Fingolfin (whose people made a much more treacherous crossing over ice-fields), who has to cut off Maedhros’s hand in order to release him. When he is rescued, Maedhros “waived his claim to kingship over the Noldor.”¹⁸⁸

Now, while we’ve been telling the stories of the Noldor and the Tuatha side-by-side, we have yet to critically examine them. When one does so, the resemblance is uncanny. The ancestors of the Tuatha (the people of Nemed) fled Ireland in three groups, one of which becomes the Tuatha themselves. The ancestors of the Noldor fled Middle Earth in three groups, one of which becomes the Noldor. The Tuatha gained much knowledge and skill during their time in the northern islands. The Noldor

¹⁸⁷ Stewart, *The Lebor Gabála*, 109.

¹⁸⁸ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 126.

gained much knowledge and skill during their time in Valinor. The Tuatha are led back to Ireland by their king to claim it as their own. The Noldor are led back to Middle Earth by their leader to reclaim their home. The Tuatha flee from persecution and travel to Ireland in great ships which they subsequently burn so they cannot be followed. The Noldor flee from the Valar and the other Elves in great ships as they travel to Middle Earth, whereupon they burn their ships so that they, too, cannot be followed. Both give battle to the current inhabitants, who can be seen as very distant kin, in darkness. In both battles, the leader loses his hand, and consequently the right to kingship. It appears that nearly every step of the story of the Tuatha directly parallels a step of the story of the Noldor. It is simply *too similar* to chalk up to coincidence.

These similarities are only made more significant in light of the points already made with regard to Elves. Consider the Elves we have already discussed in relation to Celtic mythology. Consider further how, in the discussion of those Elves (such as Galadriel and Arwen), we have not only considered them as having Celtic roots, but more specifically, Irish Celtic roots. Consider yet more “coincidentally” that those Irish Celtic qualities are drawn specifically from members of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* and the case seems all the stronger. If that were not enough, consider that the Elves are a race born in eternal nighttime, as the sun had not yet been

created. This resonates with the Rees brothers' assertion about the Tuatha that "fairies and other spirits become active after sunset; night, in a very real sense, belongs to them."¹⁸⁹

The evidence continues to mount as we explore the story of the Tuatha further. They are ultimately usurped, defeated by the final group to land in Ireland, the Sons of Mil. As previously mentioned, the Sons of Mil are seen as the historical ancestors of the Irish. They give battle to the Tuatha when they arrive and are the ultimate victors. As a result, the Tuatha agree to split Ireland with the Sons of Mil and take the lower-half, literally underground. Dáithí Ó hÓgáin refers in detail to the agreement of the Tuatha Dé Danann to dwell underground, in ancient barrows and cairns, and to their alternative portrayal as living in "idyllic overseas realms, such as Magh Meall (the 'Delightful Plain') or Eamhain Ablach ('the Region of Apples')."¹⁹⁰ For Tolkien, who envisioned his world as the pre-history and myth of England itself, Men are the race seen as our own descendents. And, while the men of Middle Earth do not conquer the Elves by force and so drive them from the land, many Elves return to Valinor, sailing across the sea to idyllic overseas realms, just as Ó hÓgáin claims the Tuatha do.

¹⁸⁹ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 83.

¹⁹⁰ Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (London: Ryan, 1990), 408-09.

Of further interest is what becomes of the Tuatha Dé Danann as the mythology grows older and is passed down through the ages. At the hands of merciless time, the Tuatha Dé Danann ultimately come to be transformed into the Irish fairies of modern folklore and popular imagination.¹⁹¹ The notion of the Tuatha becoming the “little people” we are all so fond of in folklore (despite the fact that the Tuatha themselves were anything but little) is also reflected in Tolkien’s Elves. In *The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien outlines an early plan for the general relationship between Men and Elves (which, as has been noted, he conceived of as fairies originally): “Men were almost of a stature at first with Elves, the fairies being far greater and men smaller than now. As the power of Men has grown the fairies have dwindled and Men waxed somewhat.”¹⁹² Remarkably, this is *exactly* the belief regarding what happened to the Tuatha. Tolkien goes further and says “ever as Men wax more powerful and numerous so the fairies fade and grow small and tenuous, filmy and transparent, but Men larger and more dense and gross. At last Men, or almost all, can no longer see the fairies.”¹⁹³ This idea seems to still be in circulation in Tolkien’s mind as late as *Lord of the Rings*, when Galadriel tells Frodo of the eventual fate of the Elves, should he succeed in his

¹⁹¹ Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance*, 185.

¹⁹² Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales* 2, 332.

¹⁹³ Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales* 2, 332.

quest: “Our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten.”¹⁹⁴ This brings their fate in line with that of the Tuatha, who were reduced from massive, sometimes giant (the Dagda, for example) god-like figures to diminutive “little people” who are now rarely seen, if ever.

Before we move on, briefly revisit the fate of the Tuatha after their defeat at the hands of the Sons of Mil. While many sailed away overseas, the remaining Tuatha fled to their underground realms, which became the Celtic Otherworld, a world populated by fairies where magic is commonplace. Not surprisingly, this idea of fairies being *underground* is also preserved in Tolkien’s mythology. The realm of the Elven King Thingol is Doriath and his kingdom is housed in a group of 1000 caves. Gondolin, the other realm of the Elves in the First Age, is only accessible through a long underground tunnel. Both realms are physically “under” or “lower”, just as the Celtic Otherworld for the Tuatha Dé Danann is “under”. Both realms are inhabited by Tolkien’s Elves, equivalent to the fairies of the otherworld (and the Tuatha Dé Danann). Even the more well-known realms of the Elves, such as Rivendell, Lothlórien and Mirkwood, preserve the Celtic Otherworld sense of underground and even heighten

¹⁹⁴ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 431.

the sense of magic and timelessness (when in the Celtic Otherworld, one never knew how time passed outside in the real world), but that is a discussion for another chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE FORBIDDEN POOL

Celtic Otherworlds in Middle Earth

At the end of the prior chapter, we hinted at the existence of Celtic Otherworlds being present in Tolkien's mythology. Indeed, their influence can be seen in many of the more mystical realms in Middle Earth. In Celtic mythology, the Otherworld has an eclectic collection of qualities, some of which are rather contradictory: "Both Irish and Welsh accounts are frequently ambiguous and contradictory about the place of the Otherworld. It may be implacable on human maps; or it may be identified with a remote island in or under the western seas."¹⁹⁵ Often the Otherworld is depicted as an Elysian place, a land of happiness and excess. Additionally (and somewhat paradoxically), "the Celtic Otherworld sometimes subsumes the Mediterranean concept of the underworld."¹⁹⁶ This association with the underworld seems supported by

¹⁹⁵ "Otherworld," *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Web.

¹⁹⁶ "Otherworld," *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*.

the propensity of Celtic characters that pass from the mortal realm to the realm of the Otherworld just *prior* to their death.

King Arthur, for example, is taken to the island of Avalon (an Otherworld) when he is mortally wounded. In *The Voyage of Bran*, Bran and his crew set sail for an Otherworld paradise. When they eventually return to Ireland they cannot set foot in the mortal realm without dying (as time, which had been suspended while they were in the Otherworld, would catch up to them) – a fate proven when Nechtan, Collbran’s son “leaps from them out of the coracle. As soon as he touched the earth of Ireland, forthwith he was a heap of ashes, as though he had been in the earth for many hundred years.”¹⁹⁷ While these sailors were not on their deathbeds prior to their departure, the last act of their lives in the mortal realm was their departure for the Otherworld. Note the fine distinction here – the Otherworld is not the world of the dead, but a world of eternal life: people don’t go there once they’ve died; they go there *to escape death*. This is clearly seen in “Echtra Connla” (“The Adventure of Connla”), wherein Connla leaves the mortal realm for the Otherworld when a fairy woman promises him escape from old age and death. As J.A. MacCulloch says, “one of the most marked characteristics of the Celtic otherworld is its

¹⁹⁷ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal*, (London: David Nutt in the Strand), 32.

deathlessness. It is ‘the land of the living’ or of ‘the Ever-Living Ones,’ and of eternal youth.”¹⁹⁸

This theme of travelling to the Otherworld prior to one’s death is echoed in the ending of *The Lord of the Rings*. One of the final scenes we witness is the departure of Frodo, Bilbo, Gandalf and the Elves from Middle Earth for the Grey Havens, a place with a distinctly Otherworld feel. The characters are being summoned to an undying land of plenty far out in the Western Sea, implacable on a map, unfindable by the common sailor. And, indeed, the description of the journey and arrival is reminiscent of a transition to the Otherworld, a transition that is typically subtle:

And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 376.

¹⁹⁹ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 347.

Of the Elves, Galadriel has already said they “must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten.”²⁰⁰ So, prior to their death to the consciousness of Middle Earth and their literal death as they waste away into nothingness, they embark upon a journey to the West, sailing to the Otherworld. By the end of the book, Bilbo has grown ancient and is close to death himself. Yet, before his actual death he is invited to sail to the Grey Havens by a denizen of the realm, Cirdan the shipwright. Similarly, Frodo informs Sam that he is “wounded; it will never really heal.”²⁰¹ Pre-empting the death that would eventually cause, Frodo sails as well. Gandalf also accompanies the group, as his time on Middle Earth has come to a close. This is all very much in-line with the Celtic tradition – none of these characters travel to the Otherworld *when they die*. They are instead *avoiding* their death through their departure to the Otherworld.

Yet there are multiple island Otherworlds in Celtic lore, some of which are actually *beneath the waves*, or sunken.²⁰² Coincidentally, Tolkien’s own mythology harbors a sunken western island of its own: Númenor. It must be said that the tale of “The Drowning of Númenor” draws heavily from the story of Atlantis, so much so that Tolkien himself

²⁰⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 431.

²⁰¹ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 341.

²⁰² MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 366.

referred to it as “a new version of the Atlantis legend.”²⁰³ Clearly, Tolkien saw Atlantis in the legends of Númenor. However, drawing from one mythology does not mean one cannot draw from others as well. The question is, are there any connections between the various Celtic sunken lands and Númenor? The answer is: maybe. The Welsh, Bretons, Cornish and Irish all have stories of sunken lands. While the stories all share some general characteristics, their details tend to differ, particularly in the cause of the sinking. The Welsh island of Cantre’r Gwaelod was inundated when a drunken dike-keeper allowed the waters to flood the land. The Breton legend of Ker-Is tells the tale of a wealthy island protected by dikes flooded as a punishment for immoral behavior. In Cornish legend we have the lost land of Lyonesse, which appears in the Arthurian story of Tristan. For the Irish, the legend is Hy-Brasil, a mysterious island to the West that only appears every seven years. Add to this list the city of Númenor, an island of men off the Western coast of Middle Earth that is washed over by waves in retribution for taking the counsels of evil beings and attempting to invade Valinor.

These stories all have certain common elements. All the lands were purported to be found on the *western* coast of their respective regions of

²⁰³ Carpenter, *Letters*, 378.

origin.²⁰⁴ Excluding Númenor, which is from a geographically different time, all the flooded lands are relatively close to each other. And, while all of the stories end with the same flood, each has a distinctive and local reason behind it. Despite their uniqueness, the reasons are still linked by the fact that each flood occurred directly because of a sinful act carried out by a portion of the population. Keeping in mind Tolkien's goal to create a body of loosely connected and distinctly English legend, it does not seem much of a stretch to conclude that Tolkien saw an opportunity to use the locality of the other stories to bolster the reality of his own sunken land story. After all, the Welsh, Irish, Bretons and Cornish all had their sunken lands, why couldn't the English?

All of these sunken isles carried some sort of Otherworld connection, and, as we've already seen with *The Notion Club Papers*, the destination of Númenor is clearly an Otherworld. In addition to this general similarity, there are also some real, albeit indirect, references in Tolkien's own work, if one knows where to look. Again, we return to the *Notion Club Papers*. At one point, during a meeting of the club, a violent tempest interrupts conversation and Jeremy and Lowdham (two of the members of the Notion Club) take on Númenorian identities and appear on a Númenorian ship riding out a storm at sea. When they return from their

²⁰⁴ However, as most of the lands that have tales of sunken lands don't *have* an east coast, it is unsurprising that all of the sunken lands are found on western coasts.

Númenorian voyage after what feels like months of adventure, they share stories of voyages and shipwrecks. “We [Jeremy and Lowdham] started off down in Cornwall, Land’s End.”²⁰⁵ From there, they went to Wales and then to the west coast of Ireland. During their journeys they “heard many tales of the huge waves... like phantoms, or only half real... Some rolled far inland... We were told of one that had rolled clean over the Aran Isles and passed up Galway Bay and so on like a cloud, drowning the land in a ghostly flood like rippling mist.”²⁰⁶ Nearly all these places evoke connections with Celtic sunken-lands. The mention of Land’s End brings into play the Cornish myths of Lyonesse, while Wales suggests the Welsh drowned lands. Finally, the explicit setting of the waves in the West of Ireland establishes a clear connection to the Irish “wave” legend, and in mentioning the Aran Isles Tolkien connects specifically to Hy-Brasil (the Aran Isles are said to be connected with Hy-Brasil). In one fell swoop, Tolkien has suggested *three* sunken Celtic lands in conjunction with his own sunken land, Númenor.

Looking at each land in direct relation to Númenor more specifically, we see a series of more subtle connections. For example, the king of Cantre’r Gwaelod is Gwyddno Garanhir, whose name can be

²⁰⁵ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 266.

²⁰⁶ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 277.

roughly understood to mean ‘long-shanked.’²⁰⁷ Interestingly, Aragorn, who is descendent of Númenorian kings, is called long-shanks by the men of Bree in *Lord of the Rings*. The land itself is “constructed” in that it was below sea-level, surviving because of a construction of dikes. Númenor was similarly “constructed” by the Elves to reward the faithful tribes of Men who fought with them against Morgoth. Both were lands of magical plenty that were eventually lost as a result of human error. In the story of Lyonesse, it is said the land was inundated to punish Mordred for his rebellion against King Arthur. Similarly, Tolkien’s Númenor was drowned to punish the Númenorians for rebelling against the Valar themselves. For Ker-Is, the deluge comes as the result of the sinfulness of its princess, Dahut, yet the king survives the deluge, suggesting a theme of the few morally superior survivors who escape the flood of a land drowned by sin. This theme is repeated in Númenor where the few men who were not seduced by Sauron (a potential parallel to the devil who seduces Dahut) survive as they flee the sinking city.

When those Númenorians fled their sinking city, they returned to Middle Earth itself, where even on land there can be found many Otherworlds, an unsurprising phenomenon when one recalls that in the Irish tradition the Otherworld was often seen as the home of the Tuatha Dé

²⁰⁷ “Gwyddno Garanhir,” *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Web.

Danann, who retreated across the seas *or* underground after being defeated by the Sons of Mil. In Ireland it is commonplace for various mounds (called a *sidh*) to be associated with entrances to the underground Otherworld, a literal “lower” half of Ireland. Similarly, Tolkien’s Elves (who are molded in the image of the Tuatha) inhabit regions that have a feeling of being “under,” though they may not always be underground. As mentioned previously, Thingol, King of Doriath, has his realm in a series of caves, while the other realm of Elves in the first age, Gondolin, is only accessible through a long underground tunnel. These are both clearly *under*. Furthermore, particularly in Doriath, we get the picture of a land that is magically protected so that only those who are *allowed* access may pass through, an idea very similar to the Otherworlds of Celtic mythology (which are only accessible by mortal men who are invited or brought there). A similar effect is achieved in Gondolin, where the entrance can only be reached by one who has already been there (the implication being, if one is not literally led there by a denizen of Gondolin, one cannot get there).

Gondolin is further connected to the tradition of Celtic Otherworlds by the hero of the land, Tuor. Tuor is a mortal man not born in Gondolin and the only mortal man to be brought within the city. He stays and, when the city is attacked, it is Tuor, the mortal man, who saves

all the inhabitants of the city when it is over-run and who slays the nemesis of King Turgon²⁰⁸ in the process. It is not unusual in Celtic mythology for a mortal man to be brought to the Otherworld to help the inhabitants win a war or a battle, as Pwyll (a man) is asked by Arawn (king of a Welsh Otherworld) to defeat his enemy Hafgan.²⁰⁹ Another example can be found in “The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulainn” wherein Cúchulainn is summoned to the Otherworld to fight on behalf of Labraid Luathlám ar Claideb.²¹⁰ While Tuor loses his battle (usually the mortal man in the Otherworld wins), he does defeat the enemy of the King and save the people themselves, if not the city, further solidifying the connection between Gondolin and Celtic Otherworlds.

Celtic Otherworlds are also often identified by the crossing of rivers, waterways and fords, just like all of Tolkien’s Elvish residences (as will shortly be shown). Often, the crossing of a body of water will mark an important point in a narrative. And often those crossings, while precarious, are not necessarily fear drenched and physically perilous. They often require the performance of tricky skills and feats, and the crossing is more momentarily disturbing than frightening. Take, for example, Cúchulainn’s crossing of Scáthach’s bridge in the *Táin*. The bridge is made low at each

²⁰⁸ King Turgon is the Elven King of Gondolin.

²⁰⁹ This story appears in the first branch of the Mabinogi.

²¹⁰ A translation of this story can be found on page 176 of Cross and Slover’s *Ancient Irish Tales*.

end and high in the middle so that it flies up and throws off those who attempt to cross.²¹¹ The picture of this crossing amazes the reader, but doesn't terrify. And sure enough, after a few tries, Cúchulainn manages to use his salmon leap feat to cross the bridge. This feeling of magical risk is retained in some of Tolkien's river crossings in his *Lord of the Rings*, and is used to denote a transition into a Celtic Otherworld-type residence of the Elves, particularly those residences that are not literally underground.

In addition to the use of water crossings to demarcate Elven Otherworlds in his mythology, Tolkien preserves the sense of under-ness consistent with the Celtic Otherworlds, even in those realms that are physically above-ground. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien says of the approach to Rivendell that "Bilbo never forgot the way they slithered and slipped in the dusk down the steep zigzag path into the secret valley of Rivendell."²¹² The entrance suggests descent and under-ness, consistent with the sense of an underground Otherworld. The descent is further emphasized by a perilous bridge crossing a river – a phenomenon that harkens back to the watery boundaries of the Celtic Otherworld. To emphasize this connection, once the crossing is made, Gandalf assures the party they are now amongst the 'Good People,' a clear reference to the Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish mythology and their Welsh fairy counterparts, both of

²¹¹ Thomas Kinsella, ed., *The Táin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969), 29.

²¹² Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 57.

whom are known as some iteration of the ‘Good People’. Rivendell is further connected to the Celtic Otherworld by the relative suspension of time while one stays there, as show by Bilbo’s assertion that “I can’t count days in Rivendell.”²¹³ This timeless quality is inherent to Celtic Otherworlds, where “one of the characteristics of the otherworld with which the Irish and Welsh imagination makes constant play is the relativity of time and space: perspectives are reversed and brevity becomes length and length brevity as one crosses the tenuous border between the natural and the supernatural.”²¹⁴

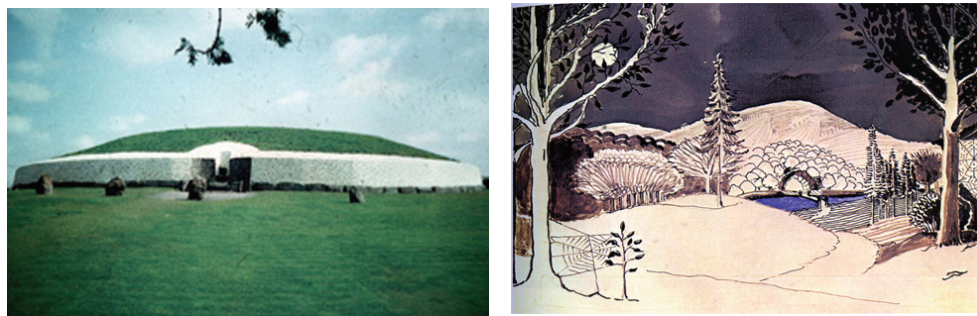
In Mirkwood, the Elves live in an *underground* hall and the entrance itself subtly suggests an under-ness, as it is framed by two great trees “like a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel.”²¹⁵ Once underground, however, the kingdom becomes vast and expansive, with little being made of its underground nature, just as in Celtic mythology. Once the traveler makes it through the passageway to the (Celtic) Otherworld, any sense of enclosure often fades. As with Rivendell, travelers are required to cross a river to reach Mirkwood. As with the bridge leading to Rivendell, the crossing is perilous, but not in an ominous or violent sense. Rather, it is *tricky*, a crossing in which touching the water

²¹³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 328.

²¹⁴ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 65.

²¹⁵ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 151.

results in an enchanted sleep that undermines the will. And, halfway across, the travelling party hears the dim blowing of horns and witnesses an otherworldly hart fleeing from invisible hunters – all very Celtic. On top of it all, the illustration (drawn by Tolkien himself) of the entrance to the Elven-King’s hall (right) in Mirkwood is eerily similar to the appearance of Newgrange (also called Brug na Bóinne, left), itself an entrance to the Otherworld, as one can see below:²¹⁶



Lothlórien, too, has a pervasive feeling of under-ness as the approach to Lothlórien is literally down the side of a mountain. It is also a very watery approach, again evoking the Celtic proclivity for watery boundaries. The first river encountered is the feeding spring of the Silverlode, of which Gimli warns the hobbits ““Do not drink of it! It is icy cold.””²¹⁷ Gimli’s warning is typical of common warnings in Celtic mythology, a warning full of a magical risk. Aragorn says of Lothlórien

²¹⁶ Tolkien, *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*, 11.

²¹⁷ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 396.

and its approach that it is both “fair and perilous.”²¹⁸ The next river they must cross is the raging Nimrodel, but with Legolas (an *Elf*, and familiar with the river) leading the way, it is not perilous, merely initially awe-inspiring. Next is the Silverlode itself, which is bridged by two ropes, a very tricky and precarious bridge only crossable with the help of the Elven inhabitants, a bridge that is strikingly similar to Scáthach’s bridge. As in Celtic tradition, river crossings (that lead into any haven of the Elves) are precarious, tricky and sometimes awe-inspiring, but hardly ever fear-inspiring and physically dangerous. Once past these watery obstacles, there is one final transition point before we are fully immersed in the Otherworld known as Lothlórien – the burial mound of Cerin Amroth. When Frodo passes the mound (a common Celtic Otherworld marker), he senses this shift to a different world, a “timeless land that did not change or fade or fall into forgetfulness.”²¹⁹ The fact that Frodo senses this shift as he crosses the burial mound is significant because of its clear connection to Celtic mythology, where access to the Otherworld was often through a *sidh*, or burial mound. On top of that, in Lothlórien, time is suspended. In Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, what passes as days within Lothlórien turns out to be months for the Fellowship of the Ring once they leave its boundaries.

²¹⁸ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 400.

²¹⁹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 415.

CHAPTER NINE:

THE RETURN JOURNEY

A Conclusion

As we reemerge from the rabbit hole, blinking the blinding sun out of our dilated eyes, it is worth reflecting on the treacherous journey just completed. We, ourselves, have journeyed into some kind of Otherworld, a world where the statements of an author about his own work are turned on their head, a world hidden, accessible only if one knows where to look. The descent is riddled with traps, some inherent to any comparison of an ancient mythology with a modern work, others unique to this particular study. Recall Tolkien's assertion that "they [his stories] are not Celtic! Neither are the tales. I do know Celtic things (many in their original languages Irish and Welsh), and feel for them a certain distaste,"²²⁰ a trap that promises failure. However, if we stay alert, we may escape such a trap. One such escape can be found in *The Notion Club Papers*, where Tolkien equates characters in the Notion Club with members of his own literary circle. He assigns himself the character of Ramer, of whom he

²²⁰ Carpenter, *Letters*, 26.

writes “among his interests are Celtic languages and antiquities,”²²¹ implying Tolkien himself shares these Celtic interests. Another tacit admission of Tolkien’s awareness of Celtic myth in his own work can be found in Tolkien’s correspondence with his son, Christopher, where he explains he chose British-Welsh as inspiration for one of his Elvish languages “because it seems to fit the rather 'Celtic' type of legends and stories told of its speakers.”²²²

From these clues, more private in nature than his public defecation on Celtic “things,” we have followed the text itself, doggedly pursuing strands both peripheral and central to Tolkien’s mythology. What we’ve found is that the text itself and Tolkien’s words simply do not seem to match. I won’t pretend to claim that Celtic tradition is the most prevalent or most important in understanding where Tolkien’s inspiration came from. I simply assert that one of Tolkien’s inspirations *may have been* Celtic, and after consulting evidence, consider the bold claim that one of Tolkien’s inspirations *likely was* Celtic: it is folly to insist that Tolkien’s inspiration *is definitely* Celtic. The evidence for Celtic mythology as one of his many inspirations, however, is compelling. While many of the parallels we have explored are small in scope, some as cosmetic as the use of a Welsh alliterative device, others ranking only as minor details such as

²²¹ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 159.

²²² Carpenter, *Letters*, 176.

similarities to King Arthur and the usage of numbers important to Celtic tradition in a Celtic manner, there are some much larger, thematically necessary details that are anything but adornments to the history Tolkien relates.

For example, Tolkien appears *obsessed* by the idea of rightful kingship. In particular, his notions of kingship are *the only* driving force behind the actions of several of his characters. Were Tolkien to have looked elsewhere than the Irish Celtic sacral Kingship tradition, with its emphasis on the rightful rule of a king bringing prosperity to the land, with such stress placed on the literal marriage of the king to the land through a sovereignty goddess, his stories would be wholly different. Aragorn, as a character, would cease to exist. Denethor, the usurper of the kingship in the kingdom of Gondor, would not become impotent as he tried to further solidify his wrongful reign. The list of changes that would be necessary grows longer the more one considers how similar Tolkien's idea of kingship is to the Irish notions. Implications of a similar magnitude would ensue if one were to look at a race other than the Tuatha Dé Danann as the inspiration for Tolkien's Elves. There are a plethora of contact points, at times so similar as to appear nearly identical. Keep in mind; this is an entire *race* of Tolkien's that we are talking about. Furthermore, this is a race that is central to Tolkien's mythology. While the Celtic is not the

most important influence in Tolkien's work, it is clearly still important in its own right, offering insight into some of the key features of Middle Earth. With the Elven connection, of course, came the connection of the dwellings of the Elves with the dwellings of the Tuatha, the Celtic Otherworld. Again, we see Tolkien using Celtic tradition in such a way that it affects his entire world.

On a more localized level, we can ascertain some Celtic antecedents to some of the major players in Tolkien's works. As a general rule, these characters that we have identified as firmly Celtic are secondary in importance. While they may be movers and shakers in Middle Earth, their roles are secondary: Galadriel, for example, while a chief player in the revolt of the Noldor, was not *the leader* of the Noldor. And, in *Lord of the Rings*, while it is her gifts and support that ultimately ensure the success of the quest, she is not numbered among one of the primary actors in the story. Yet, she *is* immensely important, and she *is likely* Celtic. Similarly important is Tom Bombadil's connection to Taliesin. While Tom's impact on the story of *Lord of the Rings* is lesser still (he only really comes in when the Hobbits first set out from the Shire, though the role he plays is essential), the degree to which Celtic mythology is infused in his character is stunningly subtle, if one manages to unearth the connections in the first place.

All of this is to say that, while the Celtic influences we have identified certainly do not claim to be the most important aspects of Tolkien's world, they are nevertheless important enough to warrant consideration. And, in their importance, they do something else. They help Tolkien in *his* goal – to paint Middle Earth as a distinctly *English* mythology. Remember Tolkien's words on his goal for Middle Earth: "I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story ... which I would dedicate simply to: to England; to my country."²²³ While it seems clear that *Lord of the Rings* has not become a commonly accepted English mythology, Tolkien *did not fail* in his attempt to provide a distinctly English body of more or less connected legend. After all, Tolkien's mythology appears to deftly blend Celtic, Norse and Germanic traditions and mythologies, resulting in something that is none of these and yet is all of them, distinct from each but evoking parallels to all – in a word, English. As Mathew Arnold said of the English, "The excellence [of English painting] therefore the success, is on the side of the spirit. Does not this look as if a Celtic stream met the main German current in us, and gave it a somewhat different course from that which it takes naturally?"²²⁴

²²³ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 144.

²²⁴ Mathew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature and Other Essays by Mathew Arnold*, ed. Ernest Rhys, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1919), 96.

In this sense, Tolkien has drawn from the perception of what makes an Englishman English and fused his mythology with a distinctly English flavor through borrowing from *all three* traditions. The resulting mythology, while not accepted as a legitimate mythology à la the Greek or Finnish mythologies, is undeniably English in character, filling the void Tolkien perceived.

Yet, when all is said and done, when the cards have all been laid on the table, there is still a reconciliation to be made. Why, if Tolkien saw the Celts as at least a part of the English character, did he so vehemently deny their influence in his own work? The answer lies in *perception*. Tolkien did not rail against Celtic literature in its unsullied form. The problem, for Tolkien, was that Arnold had branded *all things Celtic* when he said “That is just the expansive, eager Celtic nature; the head in the air, snuffing and snorting... the Celtic genius is more airy and unsubstantial, goes less near the ground... The Celt is often called sensual; but it is not so much the vulgar satisfactions of sense that attract him as emotion and excitement; he is truly, as I began by saying, sentimental.”²²⁵ As this is just the voice of a single scholar, it wouldn’t be too problematic if it weren’t for the fact that, as John. V. Kelleher points out, “Arnold’s

²²⁵ Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, 81.

commentary has gone virtually uncontradicted since it was made, in 1866.”²²⁶

Publicly identifying with the Celtic tradition meant, for Tolkien, painting his work in the hue of the pseudo-Celtic qualities Arnold insisted were definitive of all things Celtic, something Tolkien, understandably, would have been loath to do. After all, Arnold, while complimentary of the Celts, insists that “the Celtic genius, with its chafing against the despotism of fact, its perpetual straining after mere emotion, has accomplished nothing... the grand difficulties of painting and sculpture, the prolonged dealings of spirit with matter, he [the Celt] has never had the patience for.”²²⁷ Revisiting Tolkien’s rejection of things Celtic one final time, we can look at this as a method of self-defense. Tolkien, who knew much more about Celtic things than Arnold himself did, did *not* want his works to be associated with the qualities that Arnold associated with all things Celtic. Tolkien’s rejection is not a rejection of Celtic per se, but rather a rejection of the *perception* of what it meant to be Celtic. One might even say that, in drawing inspiration from Celtic literature itself, Tolkien began the process of reinserting into English consciousness

²²⁶ J.V. Kelleher, *Selected Writings of J.V. Kelleher on Ireland and Irish America*, ed. Charles Fanning, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 4.

²²⁷ Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, 82.

a *grounded* Celtic tradition, opposing Arnold's fey Celtic qualities that persisted in defining all things Celtic for so long.

With that, the sun is finally out of our eyes, the rabbit hole is behind us, and we are once again familiar with the lay of the land. The journey was a long and surprising one, made all the more surprising by Tolkien's strong conviction that Celtic influences are absent from his work. But that's the way of the world – sometimes one is carried off in a direction the author insists doesn't exist. Once we began to wade into the world with an open mind, thread after thread, path after path that we explored led to the most surprising place of all: Celtic mythology. Perhaps, though, this is unsurprising. After all, “‘it's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door... You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.’”²²⁸

²²⁸ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 102.

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